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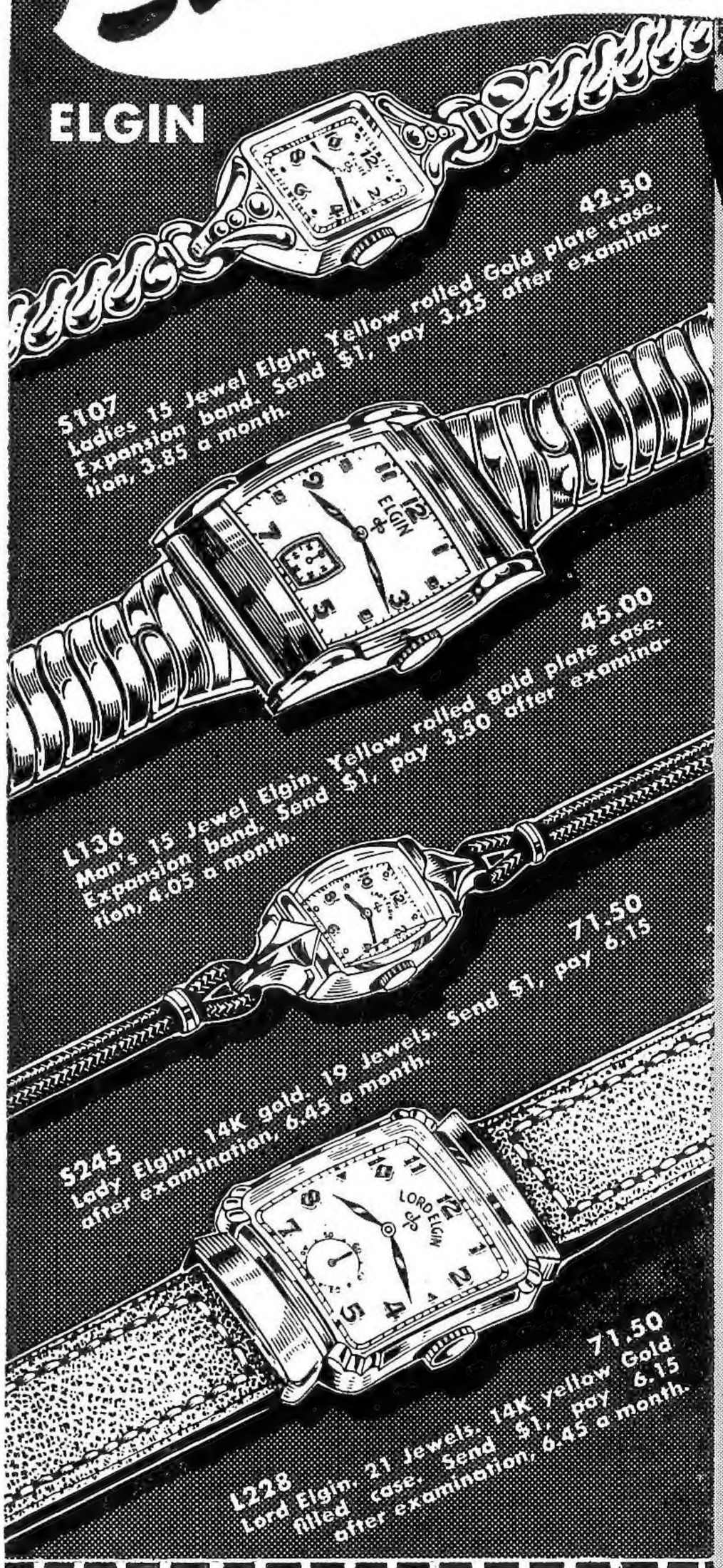
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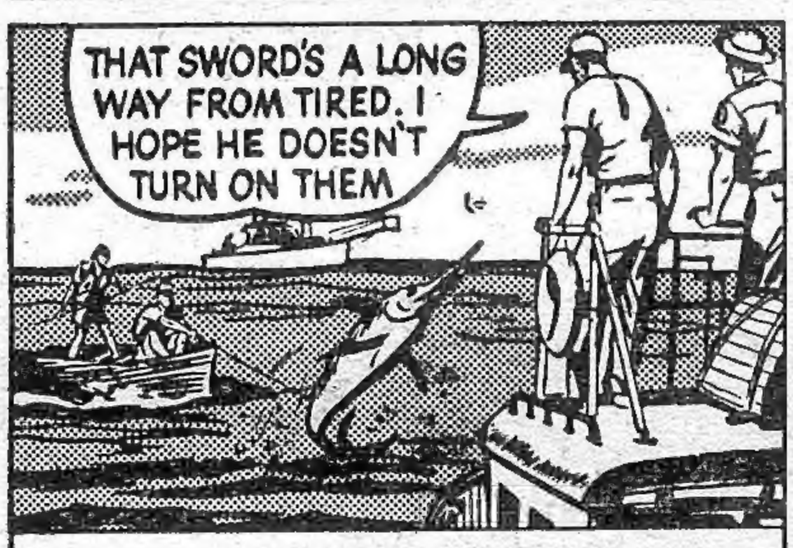

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FRONTIER funerals were often brief affairs without benefit of clergy, coffins or ceremony, but perhaps the oddest of them all occurred near Tombstone, Arizona, in the 1880s.

A group of Double Dobe ranch hands came to Tombstone to have a good time, which ended in Johnny Blair being taken down with smallpox. Preventive and curative medicine being what they were in those days, Blair was quarantined and placed in a cabin out on the mesa, under the care of a Mexican woman, who was immune from the malady. Then his friends retired to another cabin a half mile away.

"If you need anything, just holler," they told her.

Five days later the Mexican nurse approached within hailing distance.

"Señor Juanito, he died," she called.

Without a word, the cowhands picked up spades and shovels and dug a grave. But none of them had ever had smallpox. How were they going to bury him without contracting the malady?

They played seven-up to decide who'd be undertaker.

"Guess you're 'lected, Slim."

The cowpoke nodded grimly, got to his feet and saddled his pony.

Slim reined in at the cabin door, took a look inside and uncoiled his lasso. He tossed the loop deftly around the feet of the still form lying on the blanket. Slowly he gigged his horse to a walk until the corpse was clear of the doorway, then he spurred the horse to a gallop.

Across the mesa they came, the horse racing madly and the body bouncing behind it at the end of the rope. Just past the open grave Slim reined in as the body flounced into the pit. He tossed the rope in also. They planted him—pronto!

—*L. C. Davis*

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IN THE SADDLE

AMONG the remnants of four once great Indian tribes in the West, "hopeless poverty and slum squalor" have resulted in broken families and increasing misery. Such was the recent announcement of the Association on American Indian Affairs. The association called for prompt Federal action to rehabilitate five thousand members of the Santee Sioux, Winnebago, Omaha and Ponca tribes.

To the assertion concerning squalor one yellow-legged cavalryman, on furlough from the ghost-haunted Boothill of America's last frontier, might sneer, "The hell with the damned scum—let 'em rot!" This trooper would be of that hard-bitten old-time Western school whose belief was: "The only good Indian is a dead one!"

It's probably an even money bet that thousands living today in the United States never heard of an Indian. Through ignorance, these folks are blameless if they hold no opinion on Indian aid.

Other thousands, because of "knowledge" gained through the medium of moving pictures and magazines lean toward the advice of the cavalryman's ghost.

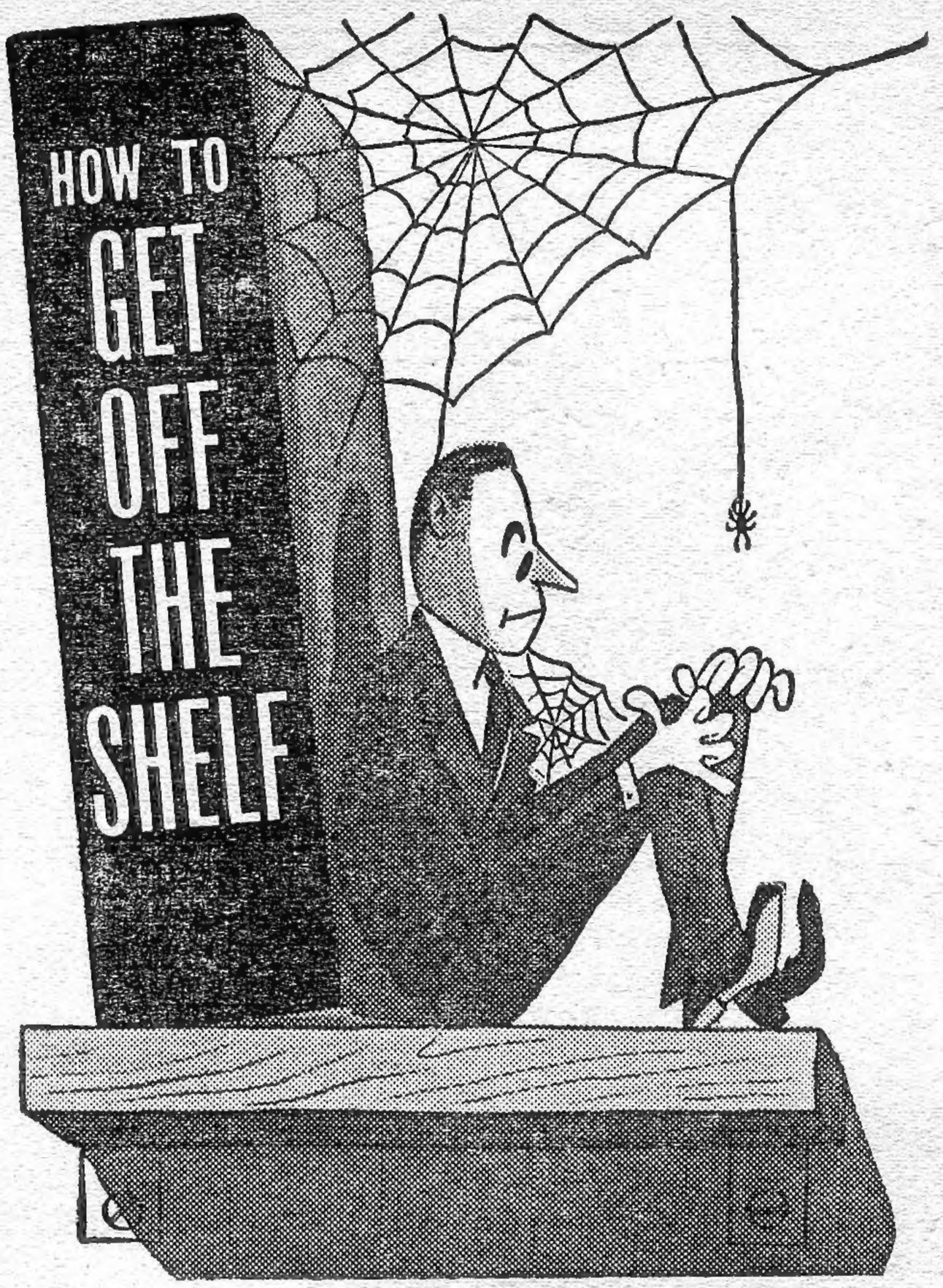
But the great majority of people, we believe, favor more and swifter aid to the kin of such men as Sitting Bull, Black Kettle, Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. This should be, not because of humanitarianism, but because it's the duty of this republic to its oldest living wards.

But whatever the plight of the Indian today, it wasn't so long ago that the original American, tricked, robbed, betrayed and then betrayed again, nevertheless put the fear of God into the white army and the rag-tag host of homesteaders and their soft-handed patrons in the east.

From time to time, in the pages of *Dime Western Magazine,* a story with an Indian background appears. Like Walt Sheldon's "Gold Bars—Iron Guts!" scheduled for next month. When such is the case our authors and editors exercise great care to insure fairness, as far as possible, to both red man and white. Surely no one has a greater right than the original American to have his story—even in fiction—presented as accurately as possible. This, of course, applies also to any yarn appearing in *Dime Western Magazine.*

Re-live the exciting days when they pointed the thundering longhorn herds north for Abilene; when hard-rock men ventured their lives in death-guarded glory holes; when lawmen whose names have became legendary trod the blood-stained streets of roaring Dodge and Caldwell! The nation's leading authors of Frontier fiction are waiting for you in the action-jammed pages of *Dime Western Magazine!* The January issue goes on sale December 2!

—THE EDITOR



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By

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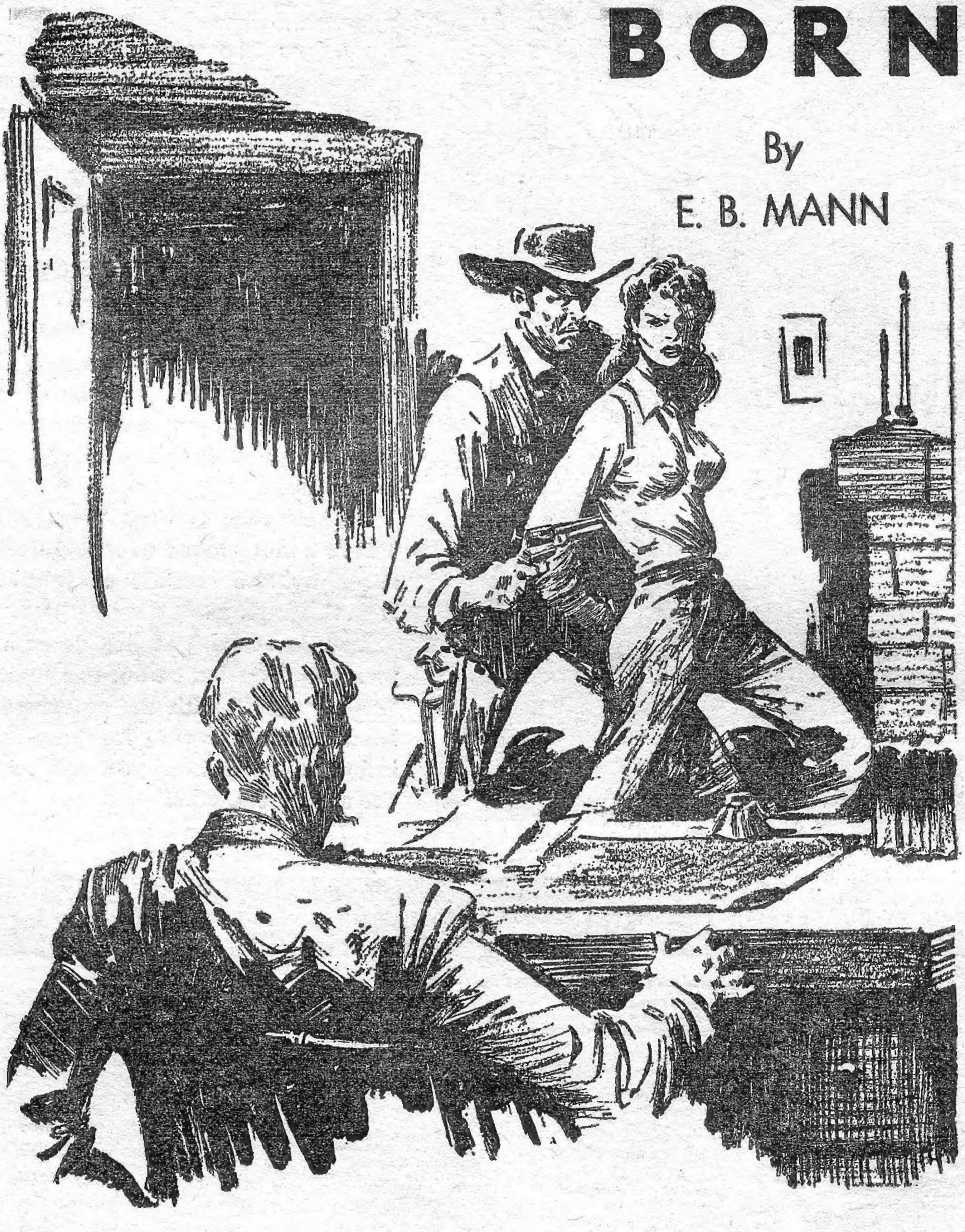

The vast Lazy H cattle empire, fifty thousand golden dollars and a dead cattle king's orphaned daughter: all this would be precious loot for the undercover bushwhack boss, who laughed as he killed—provided he could keep John Brant, the Utah Terror, safe and harmless in the grave he'd so patiently dug for him!

TO THE SMOKE

Frontier Novel With a Punch

"Don't move, Brent!" Holly said grimly. "My thumb on the hammer is the only thing keepin' this gun from cuttin' a tunnel through her!"

CHAPTER ONE

No Room for Gunmen

"I'M SORRY, Brant, but you're fired." Jim Holcomb's gruff voice carried an odd mixture of anger, disappointment and sincere regret that made John Brant smile thinly, without humor. He liked Holcomb; knew, furthermore, that the feeling was mutual. That and other things, more personal, made this business of being fired a little awkward.

Holcomb leaned forward and spread sixty dollars in new bills on the desk between them. "There's what's due you, plus a small bonus. You've made a hand, John. Matter of fact, you've made about a hand and a half, which was needed. You're a cowman—which is a different thing entirely from just bein' able to ride a horse and chouse cattle.

"Seein' the way you took hold here, and seein' you and Janie hittin' it off so well together, I got to thinkin' maybe the Lazy H had a future, that it might go on bein' a power in this valley and in this state after I'm gone. But you spoiled all that when you let that saddle bum drag you into a shoot-out. There's no place in my outfit for a killer. Never has been and

never will. It's a rough country, but I've managed to get along in it without murder!"

Murder. The word stung and Brant stirred. "The law," he said, "called it justifiable homicide. Self-defense." His voice was even, stating a fact without inflection.

"Sure. Tucker, or whatever his name was, made his play and you beat him. Easy. So easy that folks watchin' it knew they was seein' a professional performance! One minute you was plain John Brent, cowhand; a big, steady, likeable sort of hombre, hard-workin' and friendly. We liked you, John. Next minute, you was Brant, the gun-fighter!"

"Funny," Brant murmured, "what a difference a single letter can make in a man's name." He stood up with a tall man's loose-jointed effort.

Watching him, Jim Holcomb thought resentfully. It's no wonder he fooled me. He's man-sized and man-patterned. But I got no use for gunmen; not for the ranch, and not for Janie. I got troubles, but I can handle 'em without hirin' killers. Always have, and can now . . . Why did this have to happen?

Brant's words when they came made Holcomb wonder briefly if his thoughts had been spoken. Brant answered them in order. "I didn't mean to trick you, Jim. It was my aim to put the past behind me. Trouble is, I seem to have stepped into somethin' here that I wasn't expecting. You may need gunmen, Jim, in spite of your scruples. I'd be glad if you'd take that as a warning . . . Do I say good-by to Janie?"

"That's up to Janie, I reckon," Holcomb said gruffly, and stopped, listening to the clatter of high heels and the silvery jingle of spur wheels along the long hall outside his office.

There were steps, too, on the porch planking; heavier steps, and the soft murmur of a man's voice saying, "Hi, Janie," in a way that somehow stirred Holcomb to further resentment. This was Al Holly, his foreman; and there was nothing new about Holly's yen for Janie. Nothing wrong either, so far as Holcomb knew, with Holly. If there was, Holcomb thought crustily, I wouldn't've hired him! Didn't used to mind him courtin' Janie, either. But I do now. Guess I'm gettin' old . . . Damn Brant and all gunmen!

Brant swung swiftly, paused, then went into the hall and out onto the cool porch beyond. Janie was there, with Holly smiling possessively at her, and Brant's eyes were suddenly veiled and guarded.

She was tall, this Janie, even with a tall man beside her. She turned swiftly to face Brant as he came forward and Brant was reminded for the thousandth time of the sleek, proud, firm-bodied perfection of the thoroughbreds he had seen once in Kentucky. The half-smile she had given Holly faded and the look she gave Brant had hurt in it.

Brant saw her glance quickly at her father in the doorway; saw in her eyes complete understanding. Her voice when she spoke was brittle, say, entirely lacking the music it had made on other remembered occasions. "Just leaving, John? All saddled and bridled, I see, and ready to ride. New worlds to conquer!"

Holly's brief ripple of laughter lifted the hair on Brant's nape a little. He said slowly, "You form quick judgments, Janie. Things aren't always what they seem. You might give a man the benefit of the doubt."

He saw her eyes change; saw uncertainty in them, and surprise, and a quick receptiveness. But it was Holly who spoke for her. "There's not much doubt about a bullet, is there, Brant? It's pretty final! And you *are* Brant, aren't you? The Utah terror? Only trouble is, you're in the wrong country. Killin' is sort of out of fashion here. And out of favor! So long, Brant. Don't turn your back on any windows! Come, Janie."

HE TURNED, laughing, and slid his hand under the girl's arm, close up under her shoulder. Brant saw her flinch and temper flared in him, breaking the restraint he had placed upon it. He stepped forward swiftly and his hand on Holly's shoulder was a claw, yanking the man back, spinning him, setting him up for the right-handed blow that was cocked and waiting. Brant checked that blow before it was even started and let his hands fall. But he heard Janie gasp, saw her eyes widen and fill swiftly with a reflection of his own quick anger.

"John!" Her voice cut at him, steadied him. "What right have you— What possible reason—"

"No right," he murmured. "And maybe no reason. I'm sorry, Jane." He was watching Holly now; watching anger supplant the fear in Holly's eyes; watching Holly's right hand hover just above the gun in his holster. That puzzled Brant a little. Holly's holster hung high, not low and tied after the fashion of gunmen, and it gave Brant a new picture of Holly that the man should even consider gunplay against such a man as Brant. But Holly's hand dropped loosely and Brant's lips twisted with wry humor. I was right the first time, he thought grimly. That half-draw was instinctive, out of bluff, by anger. He wouldn't risk it, for two reasons: He knows I'd beat him—and he knows Holcomb has no use for gun-play. Neither has Janie.

Brant glanced once at Janie, lifted his hand in a farewell gesture to Holcomb, stepped down past Holly and walked to his waiting horse. Mounting, he swung his leg high over the bedroll back of his saddle, felt it come down hard against the Sharps .50 slanting upward in its weathered scabbard. This was the end, he thought, of another chapter; another good-by, this time to a section of country and a community of people in which he had deliberately set roots. A rolling stone, he thought; and added the inevitable: No moss. Only regrets.

His spurs raked lightly and the big sorrel lunged, then checked abruptly under tightened reins as a voice came across the wide yard at them, sharply urgent. "*Brant!* Hey, Brant, wait up a minute!"

Brant turned in the saddle, the sorrel dancing. Dan Waller came down out of the bunkhouse doorway, his tow head glinting in the early afternoon sunlight, and Brant turned the sorrel toward him, conscious suddenly of a new tension.

Something gleamed redly in mid-air as Waller swung his left hand upward and Brant caught the object in flight deftly; knew even as he caught it that there was something secret about it. "I was forgettin' that can o' Prince Albert you lent me," Waller said clearly. "Bought a fresh supply in town couple o' days ago but it plumb slipped my mind to repay you until I seen you was leavin' here."

The sorrel wheeled restlessly and Brant had a brief glimpse of Al Holly on the porch yonder, giving his strict and unswerving attention to this little diversion. Brant thrust the red can into the pocket of his short jacket. Light; that was its secret. A can so light could only be empty.

"Thanks, Waller."

He gave Waller a quick nod as the sorrel turned with him; saw Jane take one quick step forward, her hand half lifted as the sorrel's starting rush carried him past her. It was as if, at this last moment, she would have stopped him. The memory of it drained Brant's anger and he was whistling softly as he rode down into the cottonwood shade along the river.

The first turn took him out of sight of the ranchhouse and Brant reined the sorrel to a walk as he hauled the red can out of his jacket pocket. There was a folded paper in it with the message:

There's men waiting at each end of the valley to drygulch you. Go west. Brody is there with two men. Brody will fire the first shot. After that it's up to you, but Brody wants to talk to you. He says tell you he's wearing a red checkered shirt. He's right fond of that shirt; don't want no holes in it.

The message was signed *Waller.* Beneath the name Waller had drawn a flat oval, pointed at its two ends, with a circle inside it and a black dot in the center of the circle.

Brant stared at that drawing, seeing it first as a brand, getting no meaning from it. But it was no brand. It was an eye. A slow grin broke on Brant's face as the meaning struck him. An eye, trademark of the Burns Agency. So! And Brody, Big Mike Brody, range detective, undercover agent for half a dozen Cattlemen's Protective Associations. A Burns man, and Brody! So I wasn't dreaming, Brant thought, when I figured I smelled trouble! And big trouble, else the Burns people wouldn't be in it. Neither would Brody.

WALLER'S riding for the Lazy H could mean only one thing: Lazy H was somehow at the center of whatever

Waller was seeking. Did Holcomb know about Waller? Brant figured not, and his thoughts raced over his own six-months-long knowledge of Lazy H affairs, seeking the key to Waller's presence.

Lazy H was losing cattle; that was no secret. Its losses were about in proportion with those of other ranches. There was enough rustling here so that if it centered under one head it would add up to a big-scale operation. There was rough, unused country on either side of the valley where such an operation could be managed with little trouble.

Markets would be easy. There was a big rancher down in the Seven Rivers country whose government contracts for Indian and Army beef were notoriously filled with cattle bought from secret sources, no questions asked. Once safely clear of the range of its origin, a herd could even be driven direct to one of the rail-end towns in Kansas and sold on the open market. It had been done; it could be done again.

A sudden memory made Brant frown: Al Holly, watching Waller toss that tobacco can. He sent his mind back over that scene, disliking it, yet trying scrupulously to discount his doubts on the grounds of his personal prejudice against Holly. Yet he had formed his own judgment of Holly, and it was a judgment based on long, bitter experience. In any case, Waller had taken a long chance in getting this message delivered. Waller put his job above most other considerations. Only a life-or-death matter would have made the man risk exposure, and Brant could imagine Waller weighing even that choice with scant liking.

Two lives had been in the balance, in this instance. Brant's and Brody's. Two words would have been enough to save Brant, if Brant had believed them: *Go west.* With Brody at the west ambush ready to fire a warning shot at him, it would have been enough merely to be sure that Brant traveled in that direction—not east, where no warning would be given. But the warning about Brody's red shirt was needed too, to protect Brody! Because Brody knew, even if Waller didn't, that if Brant went into action with the Sharps .50, shirts would be punctured. And Waller had seen the necessity, too, of presenting his own credentials, of giving Brant some reason to trust him. Waller was taking a long chance.

Brant reined up beside a flat rock just short of the spot where the trail climbed up out of the timber and onto the mesa, stepped down on it, bade the sorrel stand, and picked his way into a thicket. He struck a match there, burned Waller's note and covered the ash and the tobacco can with dirt and leaves. This was to protect Waller in case his warning failed of its purpose. Back in the saddle again he rolled a smoke out of brown paper and Durham, lit it and sent the sorrel up the short climb to the mesa.

There are other ways out of this valley. That thought teased him, offered him an out that was tempting. Nobody could man the whole perimeter of the valley against him! If this ambush business was real—and he had only Waller's word for it—there might be pursuit if he rode straight for the mountains; but he'd be willing to bet his skill and the sorrel's stamina against that, in rough country. Once clear of this valley he could seek a new place, a new identity. East or west, if Waller's warning were true, the trail would lead him only to trouble, the kind of trouble he had hoped to put behind him.

But he was a stubborn man, a man not used to running. And he was curious. That sentence in Waller's note—*Brody wants to talk to you*—was a bait not easily rejected. It had been a couple of years since he had seen Brody. It would be good to renew acquaintance; interesting to know what was behind this mysterious business.

He came to the spot where the ranch road junctioned with the main trail through the valley and he paused there for a moment, pinching the fire out of his smoke, rubbing the blackened remnant between his fingers. The sorrel swung east, and Brant checked him. A deep wash cut the mesa across the trail southward, making a distinct barrier in that direction. Of course, a determined man could cross it, or ride around it. But—So what the hell! Brant thought grimly, and turned the sorrel's head westward. There was no use running. A man is what he is, and that fact shapes his decisions through his life.

CHAPTER TWO

$4000 Worth of Dead

AHEAD of him once as he rode, just for a second, he thought he caught the gleam of sunlight on glass or metal among the rocks at the mouth of the canyon through which, an hour or so later, this trail would take him. He wondered if someone there was holding a glass on him. There was another possibility, too. The note from Waller might be a trap. Anyone could draw a rough sketch of the Burns emblem. Waller might not be a friend at all.

He rode into the canyon mouth two hours later. Brant's eyes ranged restlessly, slanting up under the brim of his hat at the rock-littered slopes on either side. The canyon slanted northward, and the western slope was already in shadow. There was a deep wash at his left where the stream ran, with smaller gullies leading down to it. There was brush in places. If a man could fall into that kind of cover, he could fight from it.

The shot when it came lifted Brant half out of his saddle. He thought, pleased, I'm not hit! and stiffened, throwing his weight hard left and forward over the sorrel's shoulder. The horse swerved, hit the soft dirt at the gully's lip, and stumbled. Brant pitched forward, his right leg hiding the Sharps as it snaked out of its scabbard beneath him. The horse fought back from the crumbling edge of the gully, snorting, kicking up a cloud of dust that was welcome. Brant let himself be a part of that landslide, choking, feeling the hard bite of rocks against his hips and shoulders, feeling finally the welcome rake of branches as he dropped into a thicket.

He remembered the vicious whip of that bullet past him and he thought, That was close! Too close for comfort! If that was Brody I'll make the damn' Irishman squirm for it! And if it wasn't Brody, I was lucky!

A rocky crevice under a brush gave him a clean sweep of the slope off which the shot had come and Brant worked the Sharps forward, wiping its sights clean

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of dust as the thick barrel slid slowly past him.

Laughter boomed out suddenly above him and slapped back in echo, giving a final answer to Brant's question. That was Brody! A man in a red-checked shirt stood up from behind a rock two thirds of the way up the canyon slope and Brody's voice started still other echoes rolling. "I got him!" Brody yelled. "First shot, just like I told you! Pay off, you shorthorns! I said I'd drill him from ear to ear, and I done it! Let's go get him."

Another voice, sharper, came from somewhere to Brody's left. "Get down, you fool! He rolled out o' sight might slick for a dead man! Get down till we're sure."

"Sure?" Brody's voice was scornful. "I'm sure enough. If you ain't, I'll go down there alone and get him up here for you."

Over the barrel of the Sharps Brant saw Brody step out from behind his boulder, turn and make a derisive gesture at someone behind him. Brody was playing it smart, giving Brant a clear picture of the ambush. Nevertheless, Brant grinned wickedly and touched the Sharps' trigger. The smashing crack of the shot mingled with Brody's yelp, and the startled thrust of Brody's boots made a small avalanche as Brody dived back to cover. "Son of a gun!" Brody yelled. "Bullet burned a hole slap dab through the wing o' my chaps! Why, damn' him, I'll kill him!"

A Winchester cracked viciously from a tangle of rocks to the left of Brody and bullets churned into the arroyo in a searching line that started a yard or so wide of Brant's shoulder. The thin breeze, drifting the smoke of Brant's shot before it, had fooled that marksman and Brant waited, squinting for a target. He got it finally and the Sharps spoke again, driving its slug just under the winking flash of the Winchester's muzzle.

In the abrupt silence Brant heard rocks rattle under the convulsive movement of a man's body. A shoulder showed briefly above the rock tangle that had been Brant's target, and when it dropped from sight again it fell backward.

Mike Brody's voice came down through the echoes: "Tex! Holy mither o' saints, Pete, he's killed Tex!"

BRANT slid backward, hearing another Winchester open above him. He hunched to the left along the four-foot wall of the arroyo to another lookout. The rifle above him shot itself out angrily and Brant waited, twisting a thin brown cigarette with one hand while he searched out the source of that firing. Brody's rifle spoke then while the other man reloaded, and Brant grinned as he saw Brody's slugs rip leaves from the top of the bushes. Brody was firing high now, by a comfortable margin.

Brody stopped shooting and Brant sent his voice up the slope of the canyon, half tolerant, half mocking. "The thing you scum overlooked," he said, "is that, now that you've bungled this job, I've got you over a barrel. First one of you that moves from behind his boulder, I'll let fifty calibers worth of daylight into his gizzard. What's more, I'm in no hurry. Any help that comes ridin' this way will be on my side, most likely; and I got water down here behind me. It's goin' to be thirsty, up there in the sun where you're sittin'."

He heard voices above him; Brody's deep rumble and the fainter, angrier rasp of a voice other than Brody's. No words reached him but he could imagine them: Brody urging surrender or flight, the other man protesting.

It was the other voice that answered finally: "Go to hell, Brant! We'll play 'em the way they're dealt. You may be some surprised who comes ridin' into this canyon. And as for water—it'll be dark in a couple of hours. We can go dry that long; and when dark comes, we've got you!"

Brant's eyes narrowed as he weighed that warning. It was true enough that he didn't know what might come into this canyon. He knew too little about the situation here, how the lines were drawn, who sided with whom in this business. As he had said to Holcomb, he had put the past behind him, had been too happy to work cattle and court a girl like an ordinary person, a person with a future, to do any snooping. It was only in the last few weeks that he had smelled trouble.

He focused his thoughts on this matter of reenforcements. Ordinarily a man drygulched as he was could expect any reenforcements to side with him, not with the would-be killers. This time, it might be

different. Waller had said, for example, that there were traps laid at each end of the valley. He remembered his suspicion that the men here in this western gate had been watching him with glasses from the time he made his turn toward them. There was no reason why the men in the eastern canyon, too, couldn't have had glasses, couldn't have seen him turn west, couldn't have ridden down the valley behind him.

Intent as he had been on the ordeal before him, he had paid scant heed to his backtrail; and it would not have mattered greatly had he done so. Anyone following him could have kept to the river, safely hidden from his over-shoulder glances. They might be considerably less than an hour behind him.

That thought tipped the percentages against him. Anyone riding into this fracas, if they were his enemies, would man the opposite wall of the canyon, which would make his position here untenable. Once that happened, it would be too late to do anything about it. He'd be caught in the crossfire.

He turned, putting his back to the bank that was his shelter, searching the gully's steep down-slant as it fell into the arroyo. He lunged forward, digging his heels deep as he zig-zagged downward.

He was in plain sight for a distance of twenty yards or so and he heard two rifles go into action behind him; but he was too intent on his footing to note the strike of the bullets, and none hit him. He hugged the gully's left slope as it pitched downward and where that slope ended he whipped left into the main arroyo. This gave him the shelter of a ten-foot wall for a distance and he sprinted along it, seeking a position that would give him command of the canyon entrance.

Up-slope to his left he heard Brody and the other man shouting. Once as he passed a break in the wall where another feeder gully cut down into the main arroyo, a bullet *spanged* into a rock behind him and he had a quick glimpse of a figure darting down-slope toward him.

HE STOPPED, cut back, threw the Sharps up and winged a shot in the same second that brought the butt to his shoulder. There was no red shirt on this target and Brant aimed to hit, but he couldn't be sure whether he succeeded or not. Glimpsing Brant, the man left his feet just as Brant fired, diving headlong at a sharp angle into rocky cover.

As he fell, Brody's big shoulders loomed behind the boulders farther up the slope and Brody's big voice, gruff this time, rapped out crisply. "All right, Pete. Drop that rifle!" Brody's own rifle was at his shoulder, slanting down not at Brant but at the man Brant's shot had just sent into new cover. "This is law talkin'! I'm arrestin' you for that Wells Fargo job back in Kansas. Get up on your feet, Pete, and keep your hands showin'."

Waiting, Brant saw Pete rise slowly from behind his shelter, his hands lifted. Brant dug his toes in, climbing the bank of the feeder gully, careless of cover now, knowing that this fight was over.

Brody's voice came again as Brant reached the trail. The sorrel waited there, prick-eared and snorty, and Brody said, "Bring your horse up with you, John. There's a smaller canyon back o' me; you can't see it from below. Our horses are there. We can follow that canyon and hit the mesa closer to the river. That way, if anybody's trailin' you, we'll miss 'em."

Brant was breathing hard as he and the sorrel joined the taut little drama midway up the canyon slope, and it took him a moment to catch the drift of the venom pouring steadily from Pete's lips. Pete's eyes were fixed unswervingly on Brody paying no heed to Brant's arrival.

The names Pete called Brody were the gutter-gleanings of at least two languages, and Brant glanced up at Brody, wondering how the big man would take it.

"Talk away, Pete," Brody said mildly. "You're singin' a tune about ten years too late for me to dance to. Get his guns, John. And you and him and the sorrel start climbin'. Time was, Pete, when I was thin-skinned about double-crossin', even with skunks. But I ain't now.

"You killed two men in that Wells Fargo holdup. One was a poor whey-faced little lunger, scared spitless, with his hands up and shakin'. You was scared yellow yourself, and jumpy, else you needn't have killed him. One o' your pals got a slug in the belly as you was leavin', and you left him to die; took his canteen

with you because you was headin' into dry country. And you talk to me about honor!"

Brody spat accurately and turned, lowering his rifle as Brant prodded Pete up-slope and eastward. "Just the same, John," Brody said sadly, "it's a dirty business, this man-huntin'. You can't rub shoulders with filth without gettin' it on you. You was smart to quit it."

He stooped slowly as he came to a neighboring boulder, grunted once, and came up with a man's body draped over his shoulder. This was Tex, the man Brant had hit with his second shot out of the gully. He was a small man, dark, with a face that reminded Brant of a ferret. Brody carried him as if he were weightless, his right hand still swinging free with his rifle carried at the balance.

"This is Tex," Brody said grimly. "What's left of him. Pete's other pardner in that Wells Fargo business. Wanted, dead or alive, with a two thousand dollar bounty. Ditto for Pete. There's a lot o' high-priced scalps runnin' loose here, John. And there's some with no price on 'em that should have."

BRANT was still silent as they topped the hidden fork in the slope and turned downward into the smaller canyon. Now that the fight was over, the sight of Tex had roused a bitter repugnance in him with which he was long familiar. It was a feeling that had driven him out of Utah, out of a business closely akin to Brody's. Killing was a grim business. There were other, better ways of life.

Brody talked on, and Brant knew the man was talking deliberately to take Brant's mind into pleasanter channels. "This thing didn't work quite the way I planned it," Brody was saying. "I bullied 'em into lettin' me have the first crack at you; and I located Pete and Tex where I'd be behind 'em. Only Pete moved. He figured the place up-slope and behind me was better. This was just as you come ridin', and I didn't have time to talk him out of it. That sort o' put me in a jackpot. I couldn't throw down on 'em without puttin' one or the other of 'em behind me. Had to wait till you figured out my trouble and gave us a chance to reshuffle the cards a little. It took you so long I was beginnin' to wonder if your mind had lost its old cunning. Or maybe if you hadn't got Waller's message."

"I got it," Brant said flatly. "I wasn't sure how you aimed to play it."

They came down into a thicketed pocket where three horses waited. Brody swung Tex's body across one of the saddles. "It wasn't a question of bein' ready. It was like that game where the jasper shouts, 'Ready or not, here I come!' See that dust yonder? That's the jaspers that was waitin' for you in the east canyon, comin' to see how many shots it took us to drop you. Fork leather, Pete. You too, John. We'll ease down a ways and wait till they get out o' sight into the other canyon. . . .

Minutes later, with the four horses moving more steadily on the easier going on the canyon bottom, Brant spoke again through the *clip-clop* of hoofs and the faint creak of saddle leather. "I'm sorry if my troubles forced your hand, Mike. This might be as good a time as any, too, to thank you."

"Forget it! The score ain't even tied, amigo. I ain't forgettin' a couple of happenings back in Utah! You forced my hand, though." Brody chuckled. "Funny part of it was, you was as innocent as a newborn babe. It was right funny, in contrast with the way you was when I knowed you. Which wasn't so long ago, either.

"Fact is, it was comic from a couple of angles. Here you was, with your nose stuck so deep in the waters o' righteous livin' that you ain't even aware that you're the bug in Holly's gravy; and there's Holly, siccin' a two-bit badman on you, not knowin' that you're too big a coon for the gun he was usin'! And me sittin' up in the mountains among the sinners, laughin'."

Holly. The name, and one phrase out of Brody's monologue brought Brant's thoughts to focus. "Siccin' a two-bit bad man on you." So that was the answer. That was why Tucker, a man Brant had never seen before, had parlayed an insignificant encounter into a murderous attack.

He said, "I was no threat to Holly. Even up to now, I'd only begun to suspect him. And I figured that was because I didn't like him."

"You can go right on not likin' him,"

Brody said. "Holly's the one I had in mind when I said there was some here with no price on 'em that should have. From now on in your dealin's with Holly, watch him! He's bad, and he's clever."

"What makes you think," Brant said, "that I'll have more dealings with him? I left Utah to get out of this business. And there's nothing now to keep me from ridin' out of the valley."

"Sure," Brody said, "and if you want to go, it ain't my job to stop you. But you're stuck here until them three yonder get through nosin' around in the main canyon. And, while you're stuck, let me be tellin' you some more about Holly.

"Holly's the would-be smart hombre, the amateur who thinks he can hire and boss professionals to do the dirty work while he takes the big slice of the profits. You and me know that them lads last only as long as it takes 'em to get themselves in a spot where a tougher man finds it worth his while to kill 'em.

"But Holly can't see that. Holly sees himself as the boss, the brain, of a wild bunch roostin' back yonder in the breaks—rustlers, and men like Pete here, and Tex; real outlaws—while he sits safe and gets rich as a respected rancher down in the valley. It's a fool notion, but that's how Holly sees it."

"Rancher?" Brant repeated the word softly. "Holly's only the Lazy H foreman."

BRODY laughed grimly. "With designs on the boss' daughter! Marry the girl, kill off the old man, and Holly's a big man in the valley and in the state. That's where you was a threat to him. The girl showed signs of likin' you better'n Holly! So Holly sent Tucker to plow you under. There was better men he could've got for the job, but Holly's a tight man with a dollar and he figured a cheap man was all he needed. That back-fired on him in a way he never expected. You downed Tucker, and it turned out you was John Brant—not just a driftin' cowpoke, the way you was figured—but Brant, of Utah.

"That scared Holly plumb down to the grassroots! He didn't know, you see, that you'd put your wicked past behind you. He figured you was here on business. What was you doin' at the Lazy H? How much had you learned? Holly didn't know, and the only way he could play safe was to kill you. Or have you killed. That's the chore we was sent to do for him."

Brant said dryly, "For a man stickin' so close to the hills that I never even got a glimpse of you, you've heard a lot of gossip!"

"Folks talk," Brody said mildly, "and I listen. It's a part of my job."

The dust cloud drifting in along the valley trail from eastward was near now, less than a quarter of a mile distant: three men, riding warily on sweat-darkened horses, nearing the mouth of the canyon in which they expected to find Brant dead and his killers around him. Five minutes more would see them past the nose of yonder ridge, out of sight of the watchers in the smaller canyon.

Brant spilled a thin trickle of Bull Durham into a brown paper, rolled it and shaped it, remembering the smoke he had made and left untasted back in the other canyon. He tossed the makings to Brody; watched Brody shape a smoke to his liking. A match leaped into flame under Brody's thumbnail and he leaned far forward, cupping the light for Brant. Back of Brody the man called Pete moved swiftly and Brant's left hand gripped Brody's shirt and hauled the big man forward and down out of the saddle.

The gun in Brant's right fist whipped forward, searing its muzzle-flame straight through the space just above the saddle Brody had just emptied. Belatedly, the derringer in Pete's hand lanced its own fire skyward and Pete's body slumped forward over the horn of his saddle. The horses milled for a moment in panic, and Pete's body toppled, hitting the ground six feet from where Mike Brody had fallen.

The following silence was tight, unbroken except for echoes and the scuffling of horses' feet in the dry gravel. Brody lurched up, panting. "Holy mither o' saints, but it's a fool I was! I knowed that viper carried a hide-out pistol, but I plumb forgot it!

"Your gun hand ain't lost none of its cunning, John. And now it's in your debt I am again. Which debt ain't apt to be

of long standin' unless we do some quick thinkin'! Them three'll hear that shootin'. They'll come boilin' around the nose o' that ridge in a minute, and it'll be up to us to meet 'em."

Brant said bleakly, "We can out-ride 'em. I've had enough of this killing."

"Sure, and blow the top clean off o' this business!" Brody shook his head emphatically. "You're a free man, John, but I've still got my duties. I've spent considerable in time and risk here and I ain't eager to see it wasted. We run, them three'll see you and me together, find Pete here, and Tex, and the fat'll be in the fire proper.

"We could gun 'em down, too; which'd be a damn' sight better than runnin', though less to your likin'. Best thing, I reckon, is to out-fox 'em. Them three are small fry in this catch; tough lads, but newcomers. Rookie privates, you might call 'em; whereas me, I shape up more like a sergeant. Odds are I can out-talk 'em. Wait here, John, and cover me with that cannon you miscall a rifle. I'll ride out and meet 'em."

HE MOUNTED, swinging his horse down-canyon before Brant could frame an adequate objection. After all, this was a brew of Brody's mixing. Another man's interference might spoil it. And Brody was seldom in error; Brant knew that from personal experience. Brody had brains, a quick wit backed by years of experience and courage Brant had never seen shaken. Brody was fast, too, with his weapons. Considering those factors, plus Brant and his rifle, the odds weren't too much against Brody even in this three-man-to-one encounter.

Brant stepped down out of the saddle, led all three horses back of a thicket and tied them. He pulled the big Sharps out of its scabbard and squatted in the shade of a tall boulder, waiting.

Brody was in no hurry. He was riding at a walk, timing this meeting to take place close to Brant's hide-out where, if it came to shooting, Brant's fire would be most helpful. The three riders came past the ridge yonder at a gallop, saw Brody, checked, recognized him and came forward again, shouting.

Brody reined up and hooked one leg around the horn of his saddle. He was not more than a hundred yards distant. Brant could hear each word of their talk when it started, see each movement.

"What's all the shooting?" The speaker's tone was rough, quickened with excitement.

"Shootin'?" Brady's answer was even, unhurried. "Oh. That was me, shootin' Brant's horse. Tex and Pete are back up-canyon, coverin' Brant and the horse so nobody'll find 'em. There's a deep gully there where all they got to do is kick the banks down on 'em."

"We heard two shots," one of the men objected.

"One shot and an echo, I reckon," Brody said calmly. "One shot was all that was needed. What brings you over in this direction?"

"Holly sent us with a message," a man said. "Only now that you've shot Brant's horse, Holly's orders'll need some correctin'."

"Orders?" Brody's voice was mildly puzzled. "I know you talked to Holly. You boys left the east canyon right after Brant made his turn west. You met Holly where the trail and the ranch road junction. Holly and the girl. You stopped and talked. We seen that through the glasses. What orders?"

"Holly says this is the time for the showdown. He's takin' the girl to town so she'll be out of it. There's a dance in town, and that'll pull most of the men in off the range, includin' the Lazy H riders. Holcomb ain't goin' to the dance. He'll be alone at the ranch, as near as Holly can figure. Holly and Witt Parker and Nevada aim to ride in on him this evenin' and put him out o' business.

"Holly'll fix it so he won't be missed in town, and he can be back in time to take the girl to the dance. The rest of us'll get the herd rollin'. With the dance skinnin' the range clean o' men, we can drive straight across this end o' the valley and be deep in the hills again by mornin'.

"The thing about Brant's horse was—that sorrel wears special shoes. Holly wanted that horse to leave tracks there at the Lazy H so it'd look like Brant shot Holcomb. Holcomb fired Brant, and with Brant disappearin', it could be made to look like Brant sneaked back and killed

Holcomb before doin' his fade-out."

Mike Brody nodded. "After which Holly marries the girl and lives happy ever after. Sure. But the horse ain't needed. I got Brant's wallet, and I'll ride back now and get his rifle. Them Sharps .50s ain't common here-abouts. An empty shell, and maybe Brant's wallet layin' where Brant might've dropped it . . . That'll talk louder than horse tracks.

"You three get goin' back to the hide-out and pass the word about movin' the herd. I'll tend to chores here, then ride in to town and tell Holly the little changes we're makin' in his plans; give him the wallet, and so on. Reckon I better take Pete and Tex with me, in case Holly might need help with his alibi or messages carried, or somethin'. . . . Be seein' you."

BRODY swung his leg down off the saddle-horn as he finished speaking and turned his horse back toward the canyon in which Brant was waiting. The three men see-sawed for a moment, and Brant's grip on the big Sharps tightened. Then the weight of Brody's casually assumed authority persuaded them and they wheeled, riding back the way they had come. Brant let the muzzle of the big rifle swing down slowly, conscious for the first time of the tension he had been under.

Brody too had felt that tension. He was sweating when he reined up alongside Brant's boulder. "Saints presarve us!" he murmured. "There was a time there when I didn't think they'd believe me! Me that never stained my lips with a falsehood!" He grinned crookedly and wiped his forehead.

But he was grimly serious as he continued. "You hear that pow-wow, John? Things are poppin' like corn in a hot skillet! That Holly's smart. Takin' advantage of that dance and your disappearance is real clever. We got a job o' work cut out for us if we're aimin' to stop it. Or are you still considerin' the idea of ridin' on about your business?"

"I'll stay," Brant said.

"Well, praise be, because this is a two-man job, and no foolin'! I'm duty bound to be ridin' in one direction, and there's sure a chore o' work for you to be doin' in another. I'm headin' for town to get the local law stirrin'. It's lucky I've done some ground-work with the sheriff so I won't be wastin' time explainin' and persuadin'.

"The dance will help, too; plenty o' men handy for a posse. At that, I got plenty o' miles to cover; the sooner I'm started the better. You'll have to get to the Lazy H to warn Holcomb. Better put Pete across a saddle and put him and Tex and the two horses up-canyon somewhere where nobody'll be likely to see 'em. We can't risk bein' seen chaperonin' two corpses at this stage o' the proceedings! And leavin' 'em a-horseback, nothin' will molest 'em."

Brody wheeled his mount, then checked abruptly. "If I was you, I'd keep to the

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foothills till you get yonder where the river swings in closer; then keep to the timber along the bottoms. The wrong people seein' you alive now would throw things into one hell of a muddle! And don't get any notions, John, about tryin' to handle Holly and his two compadres by your lonesome. Holly's plenty salty with a pistol, in case you didn't know it; uses a swiveled holster, hung high, so nobody'd ever figure him for a gunman. But he's fast. And them two with him are poison. Thing t' do is to get Holcomb the hell out o' there and leave it to us to round up Holly and the others with the posse. Okay?"

"Okay, Mike. It's your party. I'll play it your way. So long, and good hunting."

CHAPTER THREE

Stand by for a Killing

HE STOOD for a moment, watching Brody ride down through the gathering shadows. The sun was still bright yonder on the mesa but it would be dusk in an hour, and Brant turned swiftly and went about the business of concealing the two bodies and the two horses.

Ten minutes later he rode carefully down to the mouth of the little canyon and turned northward, keeping a couple of foothill ridges between himself and the mesa. Brody was right; meeting the wrong people now might upset all of their planning.

His lips tightened as he recalled Brody's warning about Holly. That business of the swiveled holster put Holly in a different category altogether than the one in which Brant had placed him. It explained, with an entirely new meaning, Holly's movement there on the Lazy H porch.

He might've got me, if he'd gone through with it, Brant thought. I'd've expected to beat him easy; would've waited at least for his gun to come clear of the holster before I'd've fired. By which time I'd've had a bullet in me!

That was the trick of the swiveled holster. It was a trick Brant knew but had never either encountered or adopted. It was a matter of a metal stud on the gunbelt fitting into a metal socket on the inner side of the holster. The holster was open at the bottom and the wearer of such a rig had only to drop his hand to the gun-butt, tilt the gun up on its pivot, and fire with the gun still in the leather. No draw, no wasted movement. It was fast; Brant knew that without knowing exactly how fast it could be, or how it compared with his own method.

Brant modified Brody's orders a little when he reached the river. It was dusk now even on the mesa, and the river bottom was shadowed. Keeping to the timber would slow him; and now that he was definitely committed to this fight there was an urgency in him, a grim feeling that time was wasting. After all, they had no timetable of Holly's intentions. If Holly planned to be back in town by the time the dance started, he would come early.

Brant rode straight down to the river, found a rocky shallow and forded, climbing up a feeder arroyo to the west mesa. There was no trail there, nothing but open country; but it would be faster going here than in the river bottom, and small chance now of any meeting.

The sorrel tossed his head irritably under Brant's urging and Brant thought, For a gent that was dead set on avoidin' trouble, I'm in a hell of a hurry! Completely honest in his self-appraisal, he knew to the minute when that reluctance for trouble had left him. It dated back to the moment when he had learned that Jim Holcomb's life was in immediate danger. He had thought instantly of Janie, and of her closeness to her father; a closeness equaled by only a few father-and-son relationships. Jim's death would be a cruel and unforgettable hurt to the girl. So hurt, she would turn blindly, instinctively, to another man for comfort. And the man to whom she would turn would be Holly.

A pin-point of light winked bravely into Brant's vision as he topped a long fold in the mesa and he slanted toward it, seeing the light wink off and on and off and on again like a signal as trees around the ranchhouse came between him and the window.

That light, Brant thought, would be in Holcomb's office, the room in which Brant had had his own last talk with Holcomb. Holcomb would have had his lonely supper by this time, would be sitting now behind

the big desk, enjoying his pipe, reading his papers. If Holly came now, the sounds of horses entering the yard would be Holcomb's first warning. And that would be no warning. Holcomb would merely wonder mildly who was coming; would stand and stretch and walk to the porch—to stand there, neatly targeted, with the lighted doorway behind him.

BRANT checked the sorrel well short of the ranchhouse and moved in slowly, noting that there were no lights elsewhere in the building nor any in the bunkhouse. Except for Holcomb, the place was empty. Or was it? He was keenly aware of the possibility that Holly and Holly's friends might be here before him; and so he dismounted a hundred yards short of the ranchhouse, remembering that a mounted man is a tall target, easily skylined even in darkness.

He might easily have missed the flicker of movement yonder at the edge of the ranchyard. He froze, trusting the darkness and his own lack of movement to keep him hidden. A man came swiftly out of the shadow of the stable into faint starlight, disappeared briefly into other shadows, was visible again as he crossed the yard and crouched low beside the lighted window. Brant saw the shape of the man's shoulder where the light touched it.

Another shape moved silently out of the bunkhouse shadows and came up toward the main building to disappear behind it. Brant waited for a third movement. None came, and it wasn't until his ears caught the faint clean ring of metal where a shod hoof struck rock yonder at the river crossing that he saw the shape of Holly's strategy.

Holly too was using caution. Even with one old man against three killers, Holly was taking no chances. He's sent his two hired men ahead to scout out the lay of the land for him, Brant thought swiftly. Now he'll ride in and Holcomb will hear only one horse coming, will figure Holly's alone.

The man yonder by the lighted window slid back around the corner of the building and up over the porch railing. There was another window there opening into Holcomb's office. On a night like this, according to Holcomb's habit, that window would be open. There was a big settee on the porch behind which the man could hide in case Holcomb stepped out to greet his visitor.

But it seemed most likely to Brant that Holly's plan would be to stage his showdown in Holcomb's office. He's a talker, Brant thought, gauging his own memory of Holly. Riding up cold and blasting Holcomb there in the doorway wouldn't give him a chance to talk himself up to the pitch of killing. If he was planning it the other way he wouldn't need the man at the window. That's in case Holcomb should turn salty, there in the office.

He dropped the sorrel's reins, leaving the horse tied to the ground there with the black shape of the ridge behind him; then moved, crouching, toward the back corner of the building. A clump of bushes gave him cover, and after that an ell of the house gave him protection. He ran then, cat-eyed, picking his way as silently as a shadow to the door to the kitchen.

Pausing, he frowned as he heard the blurred cadence of two horses coming up from the river. Two! The man Brody had talked with back there at the mouth of the little canyon had said clearly that Holly intended to bring two men with him: Witt Parker and Nevada. That would be three men, counting Holly; and three less the two stealthy shadows Brant had seen moving into position here, should leave but one rider. But it was a problem Brant had no time to solve now. He slid into the kitchen, his gun naked and ready; slipped through the kitchen into the broad hall leading up toward the front of the building.

There was a faint scent of something here in the darkness; the scent of a pipe and pipe tobacco. Brant sniffed it and thought of Holcomb. The open door to Holcomb's office laid a band of yellow light across the hallway and Brant stopped just short of it, stepping aside into the room opposite Holcomb's. He crossed that room to its front window and stood beside it, watching two riders cross the yard, unpleasantly conscious of the fact that he had no knowledge of what had become of the man who had come up to this building out of the bunkhouse shadows.

The sound of hoofs outside was loud now, and Brant heard Holcomb's chair

creak as Holcomb moved it slowly back.

JIM HOLCOMB folded his paper and laid it carefully on the desk beside him; swung his swivel chair to the left a little and put both hands on the chair arms to hoist himself upward. He paused in that position, his eyes startled as he stared through the half-open door into the bedroom that lay just back of his office.

It was dark there, but the light from the desk lamp showed him Waller's face in the shadows; showed him Waller's hand moving in urgent warning gestures; showed him Waller's lips framing yet another warning: "Sit tight, Holcomb! Wait!" Waller's finger lifted to his lips then in the unmistakeable sign of silence, and Holcomb sank back in his chair, deeply puzzled.

The horses came on to the hitching rail, stopped, and Holcomb heard the creak of leather as the men dismounted. He moved irritably, half minded to ignore Waller's warning. It was against all of his hospitable instincts to sit here. It was right for a man to walk out to his porch to give his guests welcome. But there had been an urgency in Waller's gesture, an insistence that overcame Holcomb's impulse. After all, Waller was here for a purpose. Maybe this mystery had to do with that purpose.

Boots thudded across the porch planking and two men came down the hall and through the door into Holcomb's office. The first man was Holly. The second was a stranger to Holcomb, but one glance told Holcomb all he needed to know about him. This man was a killer. His low-slung tied-down holsters branded him as a gunman, and his face—gaunt, thin-lipped, with black brows forming a straight line over piggish eyes that watched Holcomb with a passionless impersonal hatred—was a brand of even clearer meaning.

Holly stepped aside a little, shooting one quick glance at the windows. His voice was quick, faintly mocking. "Surprised, Holcomb? Meet my friend, Nevada."

Holcomb said flatly, "Where's Janie?"

"In town; gettin' dressed for the dance, I reckon. Don't worry, Holcomb; I'll be back in time to take her. Fact is, I'm in town now! At least there's men will swear I'm there, playin' poker. This is a private session, just between you and me—and Nevada. What put you wise, Holcomb? What made you bring in the detectives? I figured we'd been pretty careful."

"We! So it was you, Holly! I wasn't sure. I figured it was funny, you bein' such a smart cowman, that all this rustlin' could go on and you be blind to it. But I kept givin' you the benefit of the doubt, Holly. I gave you a job when you needed it. I couldn't believe you'd double-cross me."

Holly's laughter was ugly. But a slight sound from the bedroom stopped it and Holly stiffened, his right hand streaking to the butt of his gun. Nevada, too, heard it and crouched slightly, his lips curling up in a wolfish grimace.

Someone in the bedroom said, "Don't shoot, Holly. I've got him. We're comin' in."

The bedroom door swung wide slowly and Waller came through it, moving stiffly, his hands up level with his shoulders, his face white with a tight anger. Another man came through the door behind him, his gun leveled and thrust hard against Waller. The second man was big, beefy, his loose mouth stained brown at its corners. He was grinning crookedly as he shoved Waller forward.

"Waller!" Holly laughed again, letting his hand drop away from his gun-butt. "Well, damned if this ain't a pleasure! Nice work, Witt! How's the detectin' business, Waller? Did you find out all the answers?"

Waller came forward two more paces and halted. The light from the desk lamp, striking up under his hat brim, showed his eyes tight-lidded and restless. The look he shot at Holly was baleful. But he spoke first to Holcomb.

"I'm sorry, Holcomb. I knew somethin' like this was comin', so I hid out beside the bunkhouse to watch for it. I seen this man, Witt Parker, sneak up to your window, the side window yonder. So I come in through the kitchen and into the bedroom to be ready to side you. Parker couldn't've seen me warn you if he'd stayed at the side window; but he didn't. I reckon he switched to the front one after I stopped watchin' him. So he saw me signal to you, and he sneaked around back and into the

room behind me. He got me flat-footed."

HE LOOKED at Holly then, and his voice was different. "How'd you know, Holly? That I was a detective? How'd you spot me?"

"I didn't," Holly said, "until you tossed that Prince Albert can to Brant as he was leavin'. You're a pipe smoker, Waller. Brant ain't—or wasn't. Brant rolled brown-paper quirlies out o' Bull Durham. You couldn't've borrowed Prince Albert from Brant, Waller. He wouldn't've had it. That was the give-away, once I had time to figure a little. After that I put two and two together, remembered how you've kept sort of apart, ridin' alone when you could, showin' up in unexpected places. What was in the can, Waller? A note, warnin' Brant that he was ridin' into an ambush?"

Waller nodded.

"How'd you know that?"

"That," Waller said, "is my business."

Holly grinned thinly. "A lot o' good it did him! On the way here we met a gent named Brody. Brody was part of the ambush that was laid for Brant in the west canyon. Brant rode west, Waller, when he left here; and they got him. Brant's dead and buried!"

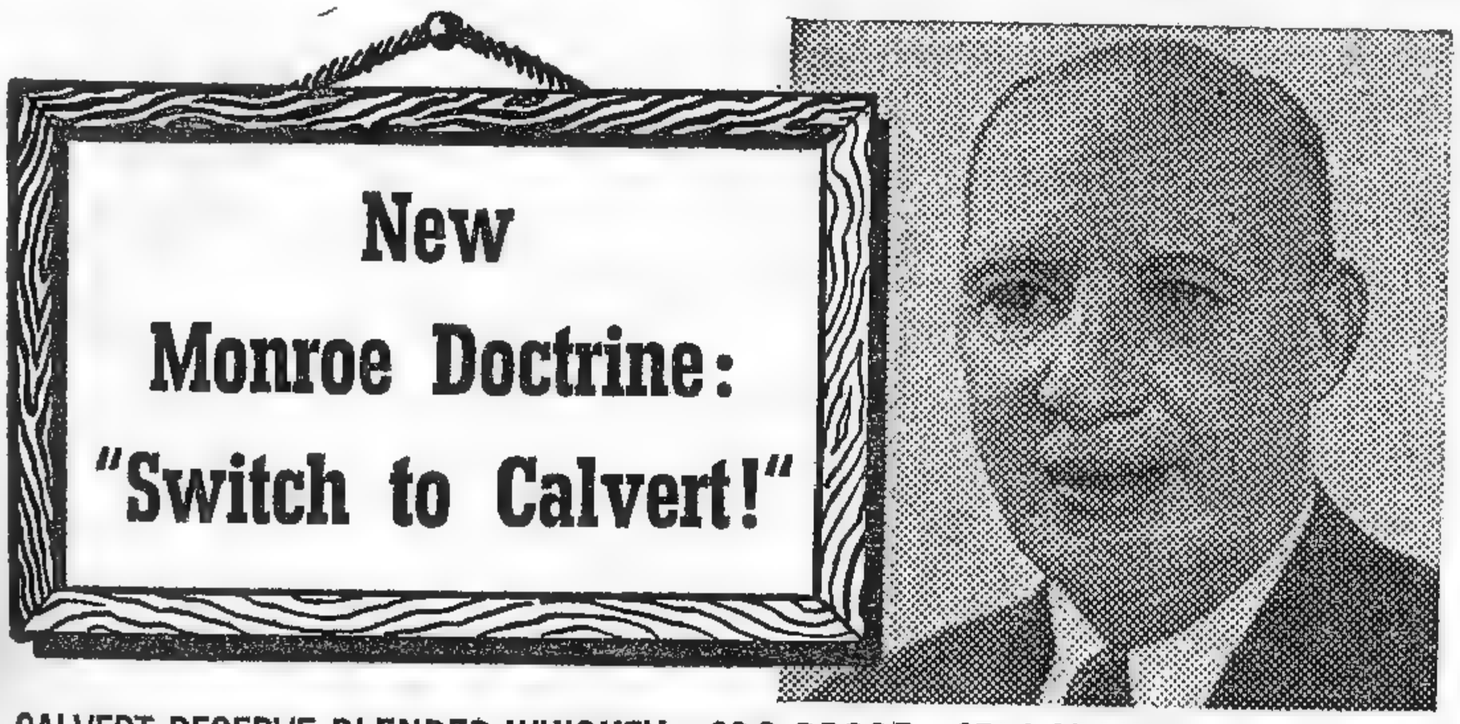
Holcomb lurched forward in his chair then and Holly's hand jerked upward, sure proof of his tension. "What's this about Brant, Holly?" Holcomb's voice was hoarse, angry. "What the hell goes on here, will somebody tell me? Damn it, Holly—"

"I'll tell you," Waller said flatly. "Brant was a deputy U. S. marshal back in Utah. He did some of his work under cover and he broke up some bad situations. That's how he got his reputation as a gunman. Plenty o' people never did know, I reckon, that he was a lawman. Some did and some didn't. He come here, and Jane liked him. and that upset a lot of Holly's figurin'. So Holly set Tucker on Brant, to kill him. But Brant killed Tucker, and that identified him.

"Holly knew, or somebody in Holly's crowd knew, that Brant was a lawman, and that scared Holly. Holly didn't know, you see, that Brant had quit bein' a lawman. Holly thought Brant was here on the same job I was hired for. So Holly had Brant dry-gulched. Your firin' Brant was good, from Holly's viewpoint; but not good enough. Holly was afraid Brant might know too much and might talk, even after he was out o' the valley. Holly's not only a crook, Holcomb; he's a killer. The worst kind; a murderer himself, and a man that hires other men to kill for him.

"He's here now to kill you, Holcomb. After which he figures to marry your daughter and be a big respectable rancher here in the valley, with a gang of cow-thieves and bank robbers and train bandits up in the mountains doin' his bidding and riskin' their lives to sweeten his bankroll. You're a sucker, Nevada; you and Parker and the others. Holly's a little man and a coward, and you're lettin' him put your heads in the noose for him!"

Holly had stood, half smiling, through most of Waller's monologue, but those last few sentences stung him. He lunged, slashing his left fist viciously at Waller's face. A heavy ring on Holly's hand laid Waller's cheek open and the force of the blow flung Waller backward.



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It must have seemed to Waller that this was the showdown; that it was now or never. He whipped his left arm down and around behind him as Holly's blow threw him back toward Parker, his forearm striking Parker's gun and knocking the weapon to one side before the hammer could fall onto the cartridge. The gun fired, but its flame angled out well clear of Waller's body, the bullet striking the top of Holcomb's desk and cutting a shallow furrow there before it glanced onward.

Waller was in violent motion now, spinning, his right hand clawing his gun out of his holster, his left foot lifting as he turned and then lashing straight out, driving ankle-deep into Parker's belly. Parker doubled forward, his hands clutching desperately at Waller's leg. That hold threw Waller off balance and the two men went down together just as a second shot shook the room with its reverberating echoes. Waller's blond head hit the floor hard as he fell backward.

"Hold it!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Home-coming Day—in Hell!

BRANT came through the hall doorway in one swift movement, his gun poised and weaving like a snake's head in search of a target. He was suddenly, furiously angry. This thing had happened too fast. Holly's blow, Waller's swift desperate reaction, had given Brant no warning. Standing there in the hall, just outside the doorway, his eyes had jerked instinctively toward Waller as Waller went into action, and Holly's shot had come in that split second. Holly was fast—and ruthless!

That shot might have hit either Waller or Parker, but Holly had fired it without caring, reckless of the outcome. But Holly had missed. The two men had fallen under the line of the bullet and Brant had caught the spurt of dust just beside the bedroom doorway where the slug had driven into the 'dobe.

Holly stood rigid now, his gun still leveled and smoking, where Brant's crisp shout had stopped him. His head turned slowly now to give him a look back over his shoulder.

Six feet or so off to Brant's right, the man called Nevada stood staring, swaying a little, his two guns hanging muzzle-down but clear of their leathers, his eyes vacant now and glassy. There was a dark and swiftly spreading stain on Nevada's shirt just under the pocket, and Brant's mind leaped instantly to Parker's bullet, striking the desk-top and glancing. That bullet had found a target.

One at a time, Nevada's guns slipped out of his fingers, hit the floor hard and bounced, spinning. They were still spinning when Nevada's knees broke under him. He came down like a jointed ruler, knees first, then hips, toppling slowly until his head and shoulders found a final resting place.

Even as Nevada fell, Waller was rising. He came up slowly, shaking his head hard, blinking. His gun came up with him, covering the room as his eyes came back into focus. A slow grin pulled his lip upward as he saw Brant, and he stepped backward over Parker's body, putting his shoulders flat against the wall beside the bedroom doorway.

"*Brant*!" Holly's voice, sharp and shrill as a woman's, rasped at Brant's nerves and made his neck-hair tingle. "Brody said you was dead—buried!"

"You're expectin' too much," Brant said dryly, "if you expect the truth from Brody. Brody's a detective, same as Waller. Only Waller's a Burns agent; Brody's a range detective for the Cattlemen's Association. There's folks comin', Waller. I heard 'em crossing the river just before you went into action. Several horses. Get Parker's gun and step back out of sight into the bedroom."

Even as he spoke, Brant himself was sliding to the left a little, then back against the wall where the hall door would hide him. He was in position as he murmured his final instructions to Waller. "Keep back until you see who this is, Waller. I'll watch Holly. Whoever it is, Holly, you make one false move and I'll kill you."

"You needn't worry," Waller said softly, "about Parker. He's out cold, and will be. The way that kick felt when it landed, I'd say he's safe for about an hour!"

BRANT nodded, listening to the hard beat of hoofs in the yard yonder. Whoever these riders were, they were in a

hurry. Brant heard the rattle of gravel as they slid to a halt; heard the snorts of winded, excited horses. There was the quick running rhythm of steps up the pathway and then a man's voice, low, urgent: "Wait, Janie! Wait, damn it! No tellin' who's waitin' in there for you!"

The steps came on without checking and Brant grinned thinly and stepped forward, no longer needing the door's shelter. Jane came through the doorway swiftly and went past him, heading straight for her father. "Dad! Dad, are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Janie. Thanks to Brant there, and Waller . . . "

She turned swiftly, saw Brant, and her lips parted a little; but no word came from them. Her eyes talked for her, saying thank you, saying other things that set Brant's pulses to pounding.

She wheeled then and walked straight to Holly. "*You*!" she gritted. Brant took one quick step forward but was too late to stop her. Her hand swung up, striking Holly hard across the face. Holly's answering movement was even swifter, completely unpreventable. His left arm hooked out, sweeping the girl in toward him, pressing her close against him—close against the muzzle of the deadly, still-holstered gun. Over her shoulder Holly's face turned vicious.

"Don't move, Brant!" Holly said grimly. "My thumb on the hammer is the only thing keepin' this gun from cuttin' a tunnel through her! Same goes for you, Waller—and for you others. If you shoot me, my thumb'll slip, and that'll be too bad for Janie. Keep clear, the lot of you! I'm leavin', and I'm takin' her with me—at least as far as I need her for protection. Maybe further."

Brant said flatly, "You're actin' like a fool, Holly. This is a hanging matter—and we've got nothing against you so far that would hang you. Your scheme is ruined, sure; but the worst you'd get would be a jail sentence. This way, you won't ever face a jury!"

Holly's laughter was ugly, mocking. "That's where you're wrong, Brant. There's a noose waitin' for me; Waller knows it. He said so, a while ago when he was talkin' to Holcomb. I killed a man—and a woman—back in Kansas. But I got away then, and I'll do it again! Step clear of that doorway! Make it fast!"

Brant moved slowly, edging to the left a little, watching Holly. Brant's gun was already leveled, cocked, his thumb firm on the hammer. But there were other guns leveled at Holly, and Holly knew it. Holly was putting his whole trust into that threat to Janie. Brant's gun, he thought, was no more of a threat to him than any of the others.

But Brant was remembering Waller's movement; that swift turn, with the arm slashing back and down at Parker's weapon. It takes a split fraction of a second for the brain to give its message to a muscle—or for a muscle to relax after the brain loses control over it! If a man could strike with his hands faster than that message could travel—and Waller had done it—a man might strike even faster with a bullet!

And Holly's right elbow, thrust back and out to keep that swiveled gun pointed up into Janie's body, was a target! A small target, but Brant had hit smaller ones. The risk was that, in order to reach that target, a bullet would have to pass close, very close, to Janie . . .

Waller was in the room now, back of Holly and off to the left of him. Janie said over Holly's shoulder. "Shoot him, Waller! I'll break free when you're ready. He won't hit me."

Holly said, without turning, "Don't try it!" But the thought of that threat behind him pulled his eyes off Brant for an instant—and in that instant Brant's thumb slipped clear of his gun's hammer.

THE shot shook the room with its own roar—and with a thundering echo. Brant's bullet struck Holly's arm just in-front of the elbow, smashing it back and around, wrenching Holly's gun clear of Jane's body. But Holly's gun fired too as Holly's thumb lost control of the hammer, and the shot spun Brant backward as if a mule had kicked him. He hit the wall just left of the doorway and stood braced, watching Holly's gun fall from fingers that were already bloody. Jane was free now and Brant saw Waller and other men pile in on Holly, smothering him, forcing him back and down into a helpless tangle.

He saw Jane wheel and run toward him; heard her voice pleading with him

and was vaguely surprised that he did not answer her. He slid down then, very slowly, into deep darkness. . . .

* * *

He was in a bed when he wakened. He was aware of that, and then the next thing of which he was conscious was the pain in his shoulder. He lay for a moment, letting his mind run back over what had happened . . . The second man, the man he had seen coming up to the house from the bunkhouse, had been Waller. Waller had come in through the kitchen, through the hall, along the same route Brant had taken. It had been the scent of Waller's pipe and Waller's tobacco that had lingered in the hall as Brant came through it.

He opened his eyes then and saw Janie sitting beside him. The sun shone brightly through the window back of Janie, and Brant blinked at it, wondering what had become of the rest of last night's darkness.

He said, "Hello, Janie."

Janie smiled at him and said, "Hello, John," and leaned forward and kissed him. The pain in his shoulder wasn't as bad as he had thought.

He looked up later and saw Jim Holcomb standing at the foot of the bed. Though the misty screen the sunlight made on Jane's hair, Brant saw Holcomb was smiling. The misty screen went away from his eyes then—not far, but farther than it had been—and Holcomb said, "Mornin', John. How you feelin'?"

Brant said, "Fine!" And then reddened a little, knowing that he had put a shade too much enthusiasm into the word for a man with a bullet in his shoulder.

Holcomb chuckled. "You was lucky. That bullet of Holly's smashed your shoulder some and you passed out; stayed out until the doctor had you patched up. He gave you a shot in the arm when you showed signs of waking, and you've slept twelve hours. Doc says you'll be good as new when you're mended."

"I didn't know," Brant said, "that Janie had a doctor in her pocket."

"That Janie," Holcomb said proudly. "She's hell on wheels when she gets started! Take that as a warning."

"Dad!" Janie said sternly. She smiled at Brant then, and Brant wondered how long it might be before a man with a smashed shoulder could put his arms to the uses for which they were intended.

"I was spending the night with Sheriff and Mrs. Cramer," Janie said cooly. "When Brody came looking for the sheriff, I heard his story. I rounded up the Lazy H boys—and because I didn't know what might've happened, I got the doctor. Doc is old and refuses to sit a saddle, but he must have driven fast in his buggy. He got here five minutes after Holly shot you."

Brant nodded. "Speaking of Brody," he said, and looked up at Holcomb.

"Brody and the sheriff made up a posse," Holcomb said quickly. "They left town about the same time Jane and the boys started. They made a job of it. Rounded up about a dozen men and maybe six-eight hundred head o' cattle. My share of that herd will buy Janie some real nice clothes—in case she should be wantin' to take a trip, or somethin'. . . Brody said tell you that was a good job you did on Holly. Waller was right; Holly's wanted right bad, back in Kansas."

Holcomb's eyes shifted a little and he looked embarrassed. "Speakin' of Holly," he said gruffly. "I'm goin' to be sort of in a jackpot, without a foreman."

His eyes came up then and met Brant's squarely. "I was wrong, Brant, about you—about not needin' a gunman. Not that that's why I'm askin' you to take charge of the outfit for me; that ain't the reason. I reckon the need I had for a gunman is over. But—I learned last night that there's a difference between a gunman and a killer. Holly was a killer. It took a gunman to stop him! I'm grateful."

Jane's eyes moved swiftly from Holcomb's face to Brant's, then back to her father's, and she was smiling. "Dad," she said firmly, "John's a sick man, and talk tires him."

Holcomb nodded, turned and tip-toed to the doorway. He paused there and looked back over his shoulder. "That works both ways, Janie," he said. "Are you comin' with me?"

"No," Jane said sweetly. "But I'm not planning to do much talking, either . . . Close the door, dad—behind you!"

THE END

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

WILLIAM·P·COREY

In 1864, at the age of seventeen, William Corey enlisted with the Union forces "for the duration."
He fought under "War-is-hell" Sherman during the latter's famous march through Georgia.
Twice wounded, Corey nevertheless continued to serve until the war ended.

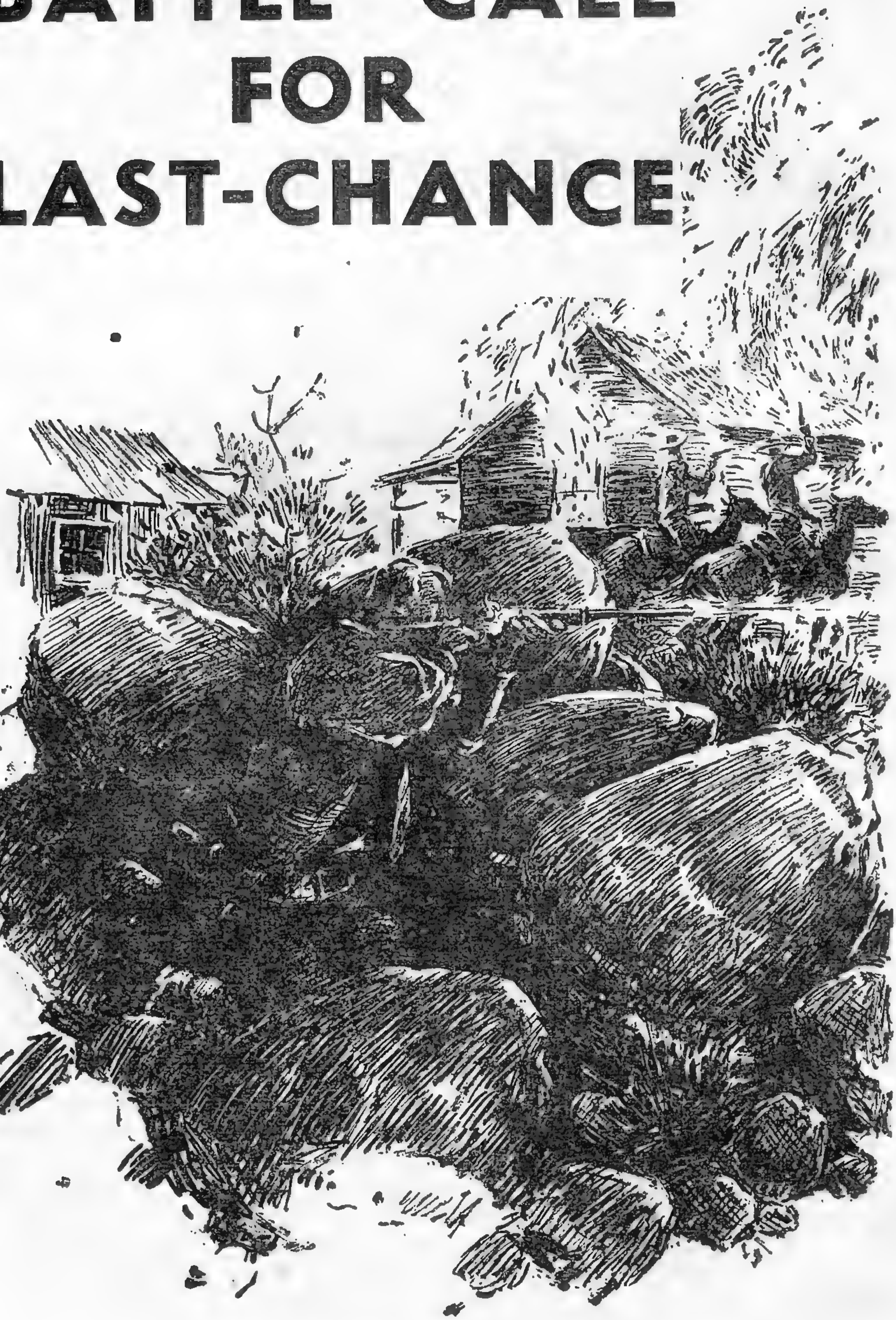
When peace was declared, Bill moved into Texas, and as an officer of the law helped tame the turbulent border towns of the Lone Star state. He captured the murderous José Chavez and jailed him. Chavez escaped. Bill trailed him clear to Corpus Christi, and saved Texas trouble and money by planting José in the local Boothill.

WINDAS 1949.

Corey lost a leg when a cattle-rustling bandit smashed the lawman's knee with a ·30-30 slug. Bill turned in his badge and went to driving the Overland stage from San Antone, Texas, to San Diego, California. He held down this job with honor through holdups and other hazards.

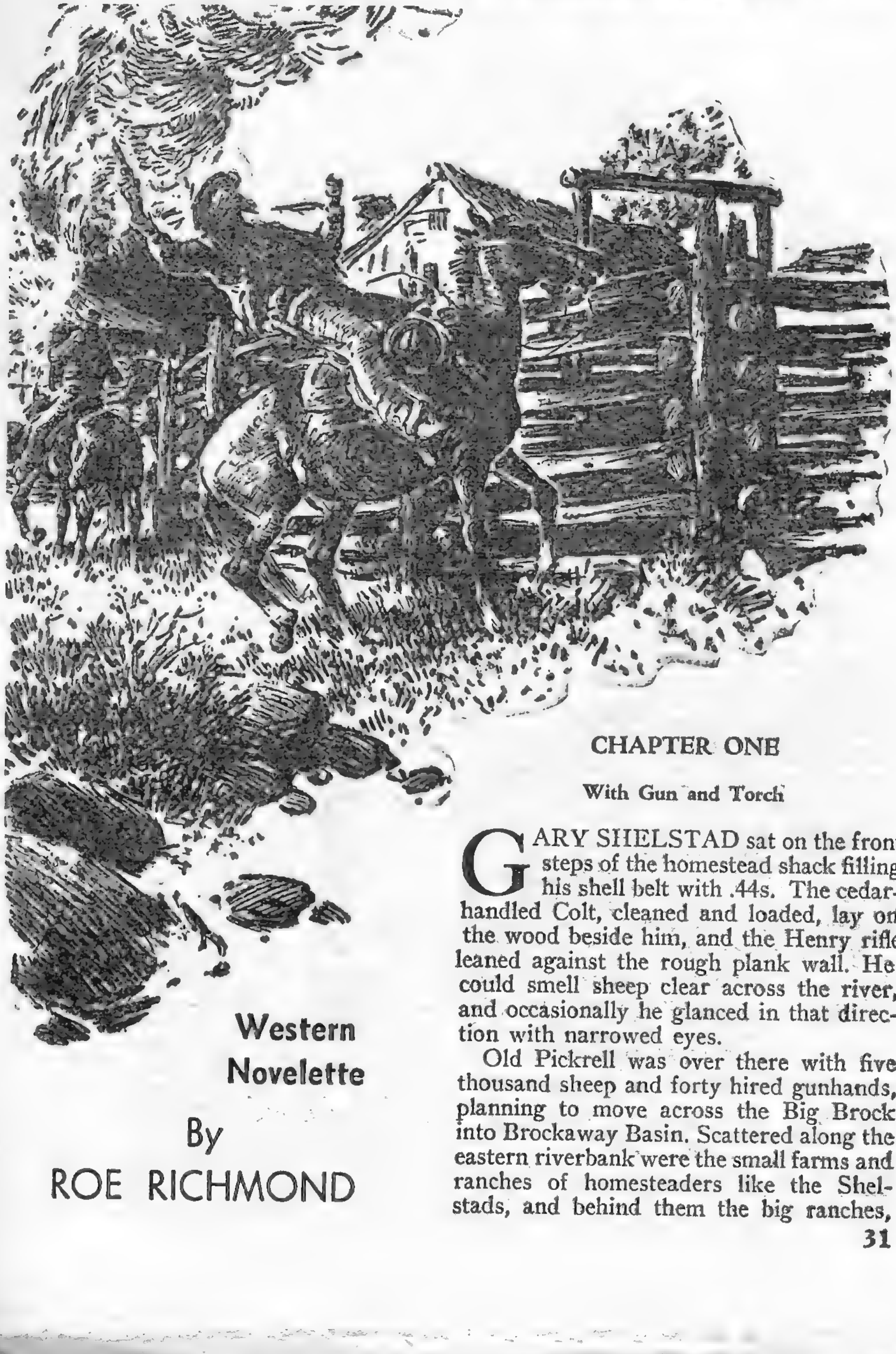
Later, Corey was given charge of a stage relay station. When Apaches tried to run off Company horses, Bill herded the animals into his cabin, fought the raiders off until help arrived. He was rewarded for his long and faithful service, and retired from active life to live in Phoenix Arizona. He died there in 1891.

BATTLE CALL FOR LAST-CHANCE



The man stiffened in the saddle, then toppled backward to the ground.

Five thousand range-wrecking sheep, herded by fifty hired gunmen, grazed restlessly across the river, awaiting zero hour to move onto the forbidden grass of the mighty A-Bar cattle kingdom. And between A-Bar and the sheepmen's hordes stood the pitiful handful of embattled nesters—vowing to die before either rancher or sheepman crossed their hard-won soil!



Western Novelette

By ROE RICHMOND

CHAPTER ONE

With Gun and Torch

GARY SHELSTAD sat on the front steps of the homestead shack filling his shell belt with .44s. The cedar-handled Colt, cleaned and loaded, lay on the wood beside him, and the Henry rifle leaned against the rough plank wall. He could smell sheep clear across the river, and occasionally he glanced in that direction with narrowed eyes.

Old Pickrell was over there with five thousand sheep and forty hired gunhands, planning to move across the Big Brock into Brockaway Basin. Scattered along the eastern riverbank were the small farms and ranches of homesteaders like the Shelstads, and behind them the big ranches,

Alberon's A-Bar, Blaine's Double-B, and others. The valley, sheltered by the Margedant Mountains, had always been cattle country. Young as he was, Gary Shelstad had seen what sheep did to grazing land, eating the grass to the roots, turning it into a desert. Although the Shelstads were nesters, running only about fifty head of stock, Gary was cowman enough to hate sheep.

For a week now, ever since they heard of Pickrell's approach, there had been excitement, tension and fear along the Brockaway. The homesteaders would have to bear the brunt of Pickrell's first impact. The big cattlemen, hating nesters nearly as much as they did sheepmen, would fight Pickrell when their ranges were threatened, but wouldn't go into action on behalf of the poor squatters. That had been made obvious at a general meeting held on the A-Bar, and Gary's ears still burned at the recollection of Alberon's contempt. The people on the river were caught between two powerful enemies, trapped and helpless, almost certain of being crushed.

Pickrell had gunmen whose names were legendary, spreading terror throughout the West: Hilligoss, Ginter, Lemoyne, Peale, Miller, Hackney and other killers. Against them the homesteaders, who were not primarily fighting men, would have no chance. Some families were already talking about moving out before the trouble started, and once an exodus began it would soon be wholesale. Dave Shelstad, Gary's father, said it was foolish to fight against such impossible odds, but Gary, Riddick and other younger men did not like to be pushed around.

Gary finished filling the belt and strapped it about his slim hips, sheathing the Colt and tying the bottom of the holster down on his right leg. He was tall, slender, supple and strong, with a plain brown face that looked even younger when he smiled, clear gray eyes that twinkled, and tousled hair. His blue jeans and shirt, thin and faded from many washings, were torn and patched in places, his boots scuffed and worn, but there was a fine clean look about Gary Shelstad in spite of his shabby clothes.

The sun was sinking blood-red behind the western peaks as Gary walked restlessly about the yard, and through a screen of willows and cottonwoods the river rippled with a crimson stain. Looking back at the house, he saw the windows reflect fire from the sunset, and Gary was suddenly desolate and lonely in the place that had been home for six years now, since he was sixteen, but less and less homelike after his mother's death two years ago. Thinking of her, the boy's throat ached and his eyes smarted, a hollow pain growing in his chest.

Gary stared into the north toward the Kress homestead and wondered what Kay was doing. Probably getting supper now for her two hands, old Brentlinger and young Norfleet. She was ready to fight for her land, and Brent and Norry would face anything for the girl. Kay's father, dead now, had once been a prosperous cattleman, and hatred of sheep was inborn with her.

Kay Kress was a young woman of rare courage and spirit, honest and straightforward as a man and yet very feminine. Gary supposed Ace Alberon, the handsome heir to A-Bar, was still hanging around as much as Kay would permit. He thought of Ace with the same tight choked feeling he had for Pickrell, and his hand went instinctively to his gun.

TURNING to the south Gary saw his father riding in, the slouching man and plodding horse both looking tired, dejected and defeated. Dave Shelstad, a big rawboned grave-faced man, had aged and shrunk somehow since his wife died. It came to Gary with an abrupt shock that his father's life had been barren, unhappy, dogged by a perverse and unrelenting fate, a succession of misfortunes and failures. Dave Shelstad wasn't a weak man, but he had always been too kind, generous and considerate for his own good. He lacked the ruthless qualities that bring material success to men like Big Ben Alberon, Blaine and Pickrell. There was too much human sympathy in Dave Shelstad for mercenary competition. Always quiet, thoughtful and introverted, he had withdrawn into himself more than ever since Martha's death.

"Any news, Dad?" Gary asked, walking to the barn as his father dismounted and started to unsaddle the bay mare.

"Not much," Dave said. "Rumors that

Pickrell's goin' to offer a fair price for these places before he moves in. That'd give him a legal foothold on this side of the Brock."

"Will anybody sell?"

"Sure, they'll sell. Either that or get chased off without a cent, maybe killed."

Gary swore softly. "Won't anybody stand up and fight?"

Dave looked at him across the mare's back. "It wouldn't be fightin', Gary, it'd be suicide."

"You aren't goin' to quit, are you, Dad?" asked Gary.

"I don't know," Dave said slowly. "Not much to hang onto here. If Pickrell don't squeeze us out, Alberon will—sooner or later."

"How long do people have to take this?" Gary demanded, hoarse with anger. "Isn't there room enough in the world? Isn't there any place where you get an even chance?"

Dave shook his head with a faint sad smile. "If there is, son, I never struck it."

"Riddick won't sell, Dad. Kay Kress won't either."

"Young Alberon'll maybe back the girl."

"She wouldn't take his help if he didn't help us all," Gary protested. "And his father wouldn't let him throw in with us."

Dave turned the mare into the corral while Gary hung the saddle on its peg in the barn. "I don't know," Dave said as they moved toward the house. "I feel old and worn-out. Not much heart for anythin'."

Gary glanced impatiently at his father. "They still guardin' the bridge?"

"If you want to call it that. There's some men at the bridge. Elvidge, Nealon, McLatchy, Farish. They wouldn't be there long if Pickrell put some of his gunsharps across. What about supper, son?"

"Not hungry," Gary said. "I'm going down and look around. I'll get somethin' later at the Crossin'." It didn't seem as if he could endure seeing his dad so depressed and beaten-down. It was too painful. The boy had to get away.

Dave's sagging shoulders lifted and then dropped lower than ever. He sensed his son's censure and disapproval. It hurt but there was nothing he could do about it. Dave Shelstad had lost interest and started letting down when Martha went. He was all through fighting.

"All right, Gary," he said dully. "Be careful, boy." Dave sighed and went on into the shack alone.

Clenching fists against the quick pang of sympathy and sorrow, Gary strode back to get his saddle out of the barn and call his chestnut gelding to the gate of the pole corral. The horse saddled, he thrust the Henry repeater into its scabbard and swung lithely up, anger eating away inside him like a slow, steady fire. He would get Riddick and go down to the bridge and try to talk some of those nesters into standing up for their rights. It wouldn't be easy, for they were a sorry lot on the whole. Gary had never liked being classified with most of them, and sometimes he hardly blamed the Alberons and their A-Bar riders for being so scornful. But he was on the homesteader's side and ready to lift a gun for them. The trouble was he'd most likely be in a minority with Riddick, Brentlinger, Norfleet.

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HEADACHES AND NEURALGIA

and perhaps a few others with some guts.

RIDDICK'S spread lay to the northeast, away from the Big Brockaway River on a tributary known as the Little Brock, and Gary headed that way at an easy gait. He was brooding in the saddle when the ragged roll of gunfire brought his head up with a snap. Urging the chestnut into a gallop, Gary's first thought was that the long-brewing trouble between Riddick and the neighboring A-Bar had broken out into open warfare. Then he saw a dark smudge rising and spreading in the gray twilight, smoke from burning buildings, and he doubted that Alberon's riders would resort to the torch. It must be raiders from Pickrell's outfit, striking at the nesters from the rear.

The shooting continued as Gary drove his gelding full tilt toward the ridge that hid Riddick's place from view. Taking the stiff slope in powerful reaching strides, Gary pulled up on the crest to let the horse rest while he scanned the valley below.

Riddick's house and barn were enormous bonfires, flames leaping and soaring, smoke towering in black ugly columns. Rid and his two men were probably lying riddled and dead somewhere over there, and bitterness welled up in Gary until he could taste it like acid in his mouth. Milling riders, tiny in the distance, were silhouetted when they crossed in front of the burning ranch. Gary only wished they were within range of his rifle.

Wheeling his mount eastward along the ridgetop Gary pushed through the brush and timber, bent on getting as close to the scene as possible. One man couldn't do much against that force, but he might get a chance to knock one or two out of the saddle, and if Riddick, Dulaney and Bondelid were still alive he wanted to help them.

Darkness was gradually closing in when Gary heard the hammer of approaching hoofs in the valley, and peering down through the woods he finally made out the racing figures of two horsemen. It looked like Riddick's paint horse and Dulaney's white-maned gray. Strung out well behind them was the pursuit, and gun flashes split the gathering gloom as Gary watched.

Lifting his Henry from the boot Gary fired, first to attract the attention of the fleeing men. They swerved in toward the bottom of the ridge, and Gary shouted with all the breath in his lungs. It was Riddick and Dulaney, all right, and they started climbing their horses toward his position.

Coming out of the saddle, Gary ran to a lofty vantage point and opened fire on the pursuing riders, moving after each shot to give the impression of numbers, turning his sixgun loose after he emptied the rifle. The raiders slowed, scattered uncertainly under his fire, and when Riddick and Dulaney joined in the shooting from mid-slope the enemy drew back, circling out of range and finally fading out of sight in the darkness.

Reloading quickly, Gary returned to his chestnut and called down the side of the ridge. In a few minutes Riddick and Dulaney came up to him, their horses lathered and blowing hard, their own faces bleak, sweaty and powderstained in the vague light.

"Who was it, Rid?" Gary Shelstad asked.

"Pickrell's boys, I reckon," Riddick said, square face scowling. "They got Bondelid. Dulaney and I was out ridin' the line when it started. Bond tried to hold 'em off but they was too many. Dulaney and I was tryin' to pull 'em off Bond . . ." Riddick shook his head and Dulaney swore viciously.

"I figured they'd hit down by the bridge first," Gary mused.

"Maybe they know where the most resistance is," Riddick said. "If they wipe that out the rest'll lay down and let the woollies tromp in over 'em."

"Then they might hit Kay Kress on their way back to the river," Gary said, his teeth on edge.

"That's right, Gary," Riddick agreed. "We'd better drift over there." Riddick was in the late twenties, a stocky man with a brutal-jawed face and the mildest blue eyes and the softest voice Gary had ever heard from a man.

Dulaney was slight but wiry with a thin red face and auburn hair that curled under his hat. Bondelid had been his best friend, and Dooley kept on cursing in a plaintive monotone as they loped westward, angling down the ridge to cross

the rolling plains toward the Big Brock.

"Masks," Dulaney muttered. "The murderin' rannahans had masks on!"

"They did, Dooley?" Shelstad murmured, thinking it queer that Pickrell's men should bother to wear masks. They were not known in the basin, except by reputation.

Then he forgot about everything else but riding on to reach Kay Kress' home ahead of the marauders. Moonrise was early, the moon nearly at full and changing from red to gold and then silver as it climbed, dimming the stars and limning the mountain ramparts with white fire, patterning the earth in silver and black. They skirted the gaunt bulk of Gospel Butte and swung into the farflung grasslands toward the river. There were no signs of fire or shooting ahead, and the three riders breathed with relief but didn't slacken speed.

OLD BRENTLINGER thrust his gray head and gray-bearded face out the door of the log cabin he shared with Norfleet as they clattered into the yard. Seeing who it was the old man stepped outside, Sharps rifle in hand, and young Norfleet followed him, smiling, boyish, fair-faced and yellow-haired.

"Trouble over your way, Rid?" Brentlinger inquired.

"Burnt me out," Riddick said shortly. "They may be comin' by here."

Gary Shelstad stepped down and led his gelding toward the fieldstone cabin in which Kay Kress lived. The girl opened the door and said, "Hello, Gary," and he told her briefly what had happened at Riddick's. Kay Kress, fairly tall for a woman, was slender with a blend of grace and strength, her hair coppery-red in the lamplight, her face keen and handsome with a fine straight nose and wide, pleasant mouth.

"So it's started," she said calmly. "Put your horses in the stable and we'll get ready. This house makes a nice little fort."

The log hut was also a good stronghold, and after studying the layout the men decided to split their force. Dulaney would join Brentlinger and Norfleet in their log cabin, while Gary and Riddick took a stand with Kay in the stone structure. This would cover all angles of approach, as well as the barn, corral and sheds. Putting out all lights, they settled down to wait at their respective windows, rifles ready and eyes alert on the moonlit landscape outside.

"It's a shame that people can't live at peace in such a beautiful world," Kay Kress murmured, and Shelstad nodded, thinking how often their minds ran along the same course. The girl spoke again: "Has your dad decided what to do yet, Gary."

"Nothin' definite. But I'm afraid he's about ready to give up."

"You had any more trouble with A-Bar, Rid?" Kay asked.

"Just ordinary," Riddick said in his low drawl. "They keep hintin' they're losin' cattle, and our stock keeps runnin' short."

"Ace promised he wouldn't let them bother you anymore, Rid."

Riddick chortled quietly. "A kid in love'll promise most anythin', Kay."

A half hour later they saw the riders darken the base of Gospel Butte and

?-XX
NOW, NOW, MR. ANGLER, WHEN THINGS GO ALL WRONG... I'VE FOUND SOMETHING GOOD USUALLY COMES ALONG!
LEST MY ADVICE DISAPPOINT-- LOOK! HERE COMES A "CASE" IN POINT.
PM DE LUXE BLENDED WHISKEY
YES -- THAT CLEAR, CLEAN TASTE MAKES LIFE ONE GRAND, SWEET SONG!
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PM
NATIONAL DISTILLERS PRODUCTS CORPORATION, NEW YORK, N.Y. PM DE LUXE BLENDED WHISKEY. 86 PROOF. 67½% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS

sweep toward the ranch. Watching them come, Gary felt his throat tighten and his scalp prickle coldly. He said, "Kay, you keep that red head down and don't take any chances."

The girl's laugh rippled, soft and musical. "You forget this is my party and I'm your hostess, Gary."

"I'd sure like to get a few of 'em for Bondelid," Riddick drawled. Then he muffled a curse and mumbled, "What the hell?"

Out on the plain guns were flaring and cracking as another crew of mounted men charged up from the rear, opening fire and scattering the first cavalcade into wild flight. "Ace Alberon," Kay breathed. "It *must* be! . . . And that means' he'll side us against Pickrell."

"With *you* maybe," Gary said slowly.

Kay looked sharply at him. "I wouldn't want his help that way. Mr. Shelstad!"

"Sorry, Kay," Gary said, watching the attack on the raiders. "Pickrell's men don't put up much of a fight, seems to me."

"They don't like the odds," Riddick said. "Twenty to one is the way they want it."

After an interval young Ace Alberon, mounted on his prize palomino, dashed into the yard at the head of his A-Bar riders. dismounting with a flourish and swaggering to the cottage door. Kay opened it and Alberon's teeth gleamed white in his handsome face. His black curls glistened as he removed his hat.

"Pickrell's bunch cleaned out Riddick and was headin' here, Kay," he explained. "But we came up in time to run 'em off. We—" He broke off short as Gary lighted a lamp in the house. Alberon's features twisted and froze in disgust at the sight of Gary and Riddick standing behind the girl in the doorway.

"We're much obliged, Ace," said Kay.

"I didn't know you had company, Kay," Alberon said, his lips curling.

"That's all right," Kay said. "Won't you come in?"

"No," Alberon said flatly, sullenly. "I guess you didn't need our help anyway." He stared over her shoulder at Riddick. "You'll be movin' out?"

"I reckon not," Riddick said easily. "It's still my water right and I can build again. Besides, I owe Pickrell somethin' for tonight."

"What chance do you fools think you've got against Pickrell?" Alberon demanded.

"Remains to be seen," Riddick said.

"You know we need help, your help, Ace," Kay Kress said.

"Riddick and Shelstad don't think so," Alberon said. "We'll see how long they last. Their nester friends are sellin' out right now to Pickrell."

Gary spoke up for the first time, "Thanks anyway for savin' us some shells."

Ace Alberon eyed him contemptuously, turned and strode back to his palomino and leaped into the saddle. "Come on, boys. These nesters don't need us any more. They'll come cryin' when their places are down in ashes like Riddick's. That'll be too late."

SOME of the A-Bar hands grinned and spat toward the house. Among them Gary identified Iverson, Burkhard and Strayer, gunmen in their own right, employed by Big Ben Alberon for the same reason Pickrell used his. Conspicuously absent were others of the toughtest A-Bar riders: Millikan, Trilli and Whitesell. As they wheeled to go young Alberon called back: "Get down to the bridge if you want to see your gutless neighbors deedin' their land to Pickrell and his sheep."

The three in the doorway watched them string off into the night. When they were gone the other three homestead men emerged from the log cabin.

"Gary, when you goin' to take that pretty black polecat apart?" Riddick drawled.

"He's always got a dozen men at his back, Rid," Gary said, and turned to the girl. "Kay, the thing for you is to throw yourself on Alberon's protection. Until this is over, at least."

Kay Kress smiled coolly at him. "If you don't stop insulting me under my own roof, Mr. Shelstad . . ."

Gary laughed. "All right, Kay, sorry again. Boys, I think we better drift down to the bridge. Rid, Dooley and I anyway, because Brent and Norry ought to stay here."

Riding southward they forded the Little Brock and crossed the broad flat tableland

that stood between the Kress and Shelstad places. Something clutched at Gary's throat and sick despair filled him as he saw, for the second time that evening, an ominous red glare stain the sky ahead. Lifting their horses forward into full stride, the three riders raced on to the rim of the mesa. The Shelstad shack was ablaze on the bottomland. There were no riders visible in the firelight.

Ingoring the switchback trail, Gary put his chestnut over the edge and plunged recklessly down the steep slope, Riddick and Dulaney close behind him. Sliding a gravel drift to the foot of the grade they leveled off into a hard racing gallop. On their way back to the sheep camp Pickrell's men must have paused to kill Dave Shelstad and set fire to the house, Gary thought, fury raging through him. Turned away from Kay's, they had hit the next homestead they came to, with indiscriminate destructiveness.

Gary reined up on the perimeter of the firelit area, Riddick and Dulaney pulling up beside him. The fire hadn't been going long, but dry timber soaked with kerosene burns swiftly. The barn and sheds were not flaming. Perhaps his dad was safely hidden in some of the out-buildings, but Gary doubted it. Apparently the raiders had been surprised and driven off again by A-Bar, before they could put the other structures to the torch. There was nobody in sight, although they might be lying under cover waiting to pick off anyone who ventured close to the conflagration.

"I'm goin' in," Gary Shelstad said. "Why don't you boys hang back and cover me?"

"We'll all go in, Gary," said Riddick. "The way things are it's better to stick together."

They went in on the gallop, eyes searching for some sign of Dave Shelstad or a possible ambush. The fire roared and crackled, the flames eating ravenously and springing high, smoke shrouding the starry sky. Blinding heat struck their faces and made the horses veer, snorting in terror. Unable to get near the house they circled the intense furnace-blast to reach the barn. They were almost there when lead droned and whined in the air as guns crashed and hammered from the wooded riverbank on the west.

Dulaney's gray screamed and reared high, pawing the air and falling backward to kick and thrash on the ground. Dooley, thrown clear, kept hold of his rifle and rolled over groaning, stretched out on his stomach and started pouring shots into the cottonwoods. Gary and Riddick made it inside the barn, jumping down, driving their mounts to the far end, and whirling back to the wide doorway with their rifles. Bullets were splintering wood and raking up streamers of dust, ripping up earth all around Dulaney. Ducking outside Gary and Riddick dragged him protesting and cursing into shelter, under a hail of slugs. It was then Gary saw the bay mare lying dead in the corral.

"I'm done," Dulaney panted. "Never —mind—me." He gasped, coughed up blood, and pushed them away. Squirming around on the floor to face the entrance, Dulaney fumbled for shells to reload his rifle. From opposite sides of the doorway Gary and Riddick began firing at the flashes along the river. The heat from the shanty was scorching even at this distance, and their faces were varnished with sweat in the red firelight.

"I don't think Dave's in there," Riddick said, nodding at the fiery wreckage. "I bet Dave got away."

Gary, crouching back to reload, shook his head, hardly daring to hope for that much. "How are you, Dooley?" he asked. turning to the interior. But Dulaney was silent, motionless, his auburn head bowed low over his rifle, his thin face against the planks.

"By God they'll pay for this," Riddick said softly, his rugged features looking tortured in the red glare, his square jaws jutting.

"You're damn right they will!" Gary Shelstad said, blinking at the hideous roaring funeral pyre of his father. "I wish they'd rush us, Rid. If they'd only try it."

"Maybe they will, kid," drawled Riddick. "If they's enough of 'em . . ." Which outfit you figure it is, Gary?"

"Why, I was thinkin' Pickrell's," said Gary. "But it could be Alberon."

Riddick ducked as a bullet screeched close. "One's as bad as the other. We got to live long enough to find out."

"We're goin' to, Rid," Gary said with

simple conviction, edging back to the door and raising his rifle.

CHAPTER TWO

When Masks Come Down

AFTER his son left Dave Shelstad sat in a rocker by the window watching the sunset colors fade and pale on the western horizon, and twilight come soft and still and silvered with lavender shadows on the earth. *"The loneliest time of day,"* Martha used to say. *"When you feel for anyone who hasn't got a home . . ."* He looked around the house. It hadn't been a real home since she died, just a place to live in.

Dave knew he should get supper but he had neither the ambition nor the appetite. He hadn't savored food, or anything else for that matter, since Martha's death. His senses were dulled, nothing looked or felt or tasted as it had before. I might as well be dead, he thought without emotion. I'm no good to myself or Gary or anybody else, just a poor old sick steer stumbling along with the drag, not wanted and not caring a damn.

Life was a funny thing. You kept looking and working and hoping for something better. It was always just around the bend or over the next hill. You believed that when you were young, you knew you'd get to it someday and everything would be fine. But things kept happening wrong, disappointments piling up, one setback after another. Before you knew it you were middle-aged, beginning to wonder and doubt, and then you were all of a sudden old and weary, wise enough to know it was nothing but a dream, all the promises empty, all the hopes blunted and broken, all the meaning gone.

Well, a man had to eat if he was going through the motions of living. Dave rose with a sigh and went to the kitchen, lighting a lamp and building a fire, setting on a pan of beans, making coffee, frying a few strips of bacon. The food was tasteless but he forced it down, gulped the coffee, and filled and lighted his pipe before washing the few utensils.

Gary is a good boy, he thought, and I haven't done too well by him. Never did for Martha either, come to think of it, but I guess she was happy even if we didn't have much. Something lacking in me, something a man needs to get along in this world . . . I'd like to side Gary in this sheep trouble, I hate to let the kid down and have him look at me that way. But I don't care enough, nothing seems to matter, and a man can't fight when he feels like that. I've fought in my time, and Gary knows it although he never saw me, but he doesn't want me to quit now and I shouldn't be quitting . . . But what can a man do when he's empty inside, all gone, like a used cartridge?

If it wasn't for me, Dave thought, Gary'd probably marry that good-looking red-headed Kress girl and be pretty happy. But feeling he ought to stick by me he's letting that no-good show-off Alberon horn in on the girl. Hellfire and damnation, I'm just in the way here, useless as a gun without a hammer. What I should do is buckle on my Colt, take my old Spencer and get down there to the bridge and into this damn fight, even if it is a mess of foolishness. It's a whole lot better for a boy if he can feel real proud of his old man, and Gary sure won't feel proud of me the way I been acting.

DAVE hauled his gun belt down from the hook, strapping it on, checking the walnut-handled .44, trying it in the holster. Then he took the Spencer .50 off the rack and looked that over carefully, getting out a box of shells and filling his pockets with .50s because those in the belt were for the Colt. Surprisingly, with the sixgun dragging on his thigh and the rifle in his hand, Dave Shelstad felt alive again, his blood coursing with new vigor, his mind working clearly.

Glimpsing himself in the mirror, Dave was somewhat startled. His gaunt strong-boned face looked years younger and there was a light in his faded blue-gray eyes. He stood straighter, taller, his shoulders squared instead of drooping. Suddenly he had something to live for again, and it showed in every line of his rangy frame. He was going to stand up and fight with Gary, Riddick and the rest. Dave wanted his son to be proud of him. It was unbearable to have the boy ashamed of his father. If I have to die to gain Gary's pride and respect it'll be well worth it.

Dave concluded. It's all I've got left.

When he first heard those hoofbeats pounding closer in the night Dave immediately sensed danger. There was menace in the sound, the pace was that of a cavalry charge, and he almost expected to hear an Apache cry rise above the dull thunder of the hoofs. Pickrell's men on the loose and spreading terror among the homesteaders, or Alberon's riders liquored-up and looking for nesters to abuse. The same hot resentment that Gary had felt earlier surged up now in Dave Shelstad. Blowing out the lamp he went to a window and saw the horsemen come storming out of the shadow of the mesa on the north.

Dave Shelstad didn't like the idea of being hounded out of his own home, but it would be sheer folly for one man to stay there and fight. Pulling on his buckskin jacket and hat, grabbing another handful of .50 caliber shells, Dave reached the rear door as the first shots rang out, shattering windowglass and tearing the walls. Sliding outside, he dodged through the cottonwoods in the backyard and ran for the ravine. From there he might be able to knock over a few of them.

Dave got to the gully unnoticed and dropped panting behind a clump of boulders screened thinly with brush. The night riders were shooting up the shack, and Dave winced at the sound of breaking windows and splintering wood. A breeze from the river brought the smell of kerosene, and Dave's stomach dropped with a sickening wrench. They were going to burn the place, Martha's home, and he was powerless to prevent it. You buzzards, he thought. You filthy rotten cowardly vultures!

Bright and garish the flames sprang up, licking hungrily at oil-soaked timber, spreading fast and roaring red, orange and yellow, making a horror of the moonlit night. Now the vandals were plainly outlined in the wavering firelight, and Dave was surprised to find them wearing masks. One of them cantered over by the corral, aimed deliberately at Dave's little bay mare, and shot her down screaming and threshing. Choking back an involuntary cry of protest, Dave Shelstad hitched himself up into position, lined his sights on that rider, and squeezed off his first shot. The man stiffened in the saddle, twisted with a hoarse shout, then toppled backward to the ground.

The other raiders milled in confusion and panic, trying to find where that shot had come from, unable to see beyond the brightness of the blazing house. No longer thinking of himself or anything except killing, Dave started slamming .50 caliber slugs into them as fast as he could trigger and lever the Spencer. Fierce exultance flooded him as another rider keeled from his horse, and the rest broke and scattered into the outlying darkness, throwing wild hurried shots in his general direction.

THERE was silence then, save for the brisk roar of the fire. Reloading his rifle Dave knew he must get out of there before they could flank and surround him. He had started wriggling backward into the ravine when there was a sudden hurtling rush toward him, three riders hanging low on their mounts and coming at a mad gallop. Crawling back to the natural rock barricade, Dave Shelstad opened up on them as their bullets beat the brush

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and ricocheted off the boulders around him.

One horse went cartwheeling end over end in a cloud of dust, hurling the rider into a limp broken heap at the foot of a cottonwood. Another man yelled in pain, wheeling his mount and riding back the way he had come, but the third came thundering on as if impervious to lead. Dave kept firing calmly and steadily. The horse went down at last with a horrible screech, catapulting the rider on overhead, his body crashing through the bushes, bouncing off a rock, and tumbling into the gulch behind Dave Shelstad.

The first horse that had fallen was up now, pitching, plunging and miraculously unhurt. As the animal ran aimlessly past, Dave leaped out of shelter, catching the bridle and dragging the horse toward the dry arroyo, talking gently in an effort to calm the frightened creature. The horse quieted under Dave's expert hands and soothing voice, and Dave led him down into the ravine, curious all at once to see the face of that last man, a sharp suspicion starting in his mind.

Tethering the horse to a stump Dave moved warily along the bottom until he came to the smashed body. Turning it over he lifted the neckerchief from the face and stared down at it in the moonlight. "Well, I'll be damned!" Dave murmured in soft astonishment. "So that's the game they're playin', is it?"

There was a belt with two holstered guns on the body. Dave unbuckled it, yanked it free, and strode back to swing into the saddle of his captured mount. He had to breeze out of there fast, before they could close in on him, if possible . . . There were more important things than taking revenge on the hired hands who pillaged his home. Dave Shelstad really had something to live and fight for now.

THE bridge over the Big Brockaway River had been built when the silver mines were booming in the Margedant Mountains. It had to be solid and durable to support the heavy ore wagons, and it had been rebuilt and reinforced even stronger since that time. It was wide, securely planked over substantial timber, the piles driven deep into the bed of the river and shored massively with rock. The bridge was ideal for the passage of sheep, although that was the last purpose any of the builders had in mind for the structure.

The homesteaders, in a gesture of defiance and fear, had barricaded the eastern end of the bridge with logs and boulders, leaving a central opening large enough for one horseman at a time. Since Pickrell had set up his sheep camp on the western side the nesters had been guarding the bridgehead in shifts, day and night. Behind the barricade on a shelf over the eastern bank of the stream was the Crossing Saloon, supplying beer for the homesteaders, whiskey for the cattlemen, and saving both factions a long ride into the nearest town, Calico City.

Ever since the siege had started riders from Alberon's A-Bar, Blaine's Double-B, and other ranches, spent their free time at the Crossing, ridiculing the defenders of the bridge. Forsaking the long bar inside the cowman carried bottles and glasses to the broad porch, where they could laugh and jeer at the nesters down by the bridge. It got so bad that it was difficult for the homesteaders to keep volunteers on duty, for they feared the caustic scorn of the cowhands as much as the threat of Pickrell's gunmen.

On this night rumors circulated freely from the saloon to the barrier that Pickrell was going to make his crossing, some said at midnight, others at daybreak. Then, to aid to the consternation and dread of the nesters, the sky to the north and east was reddened with the ugly light of burning buildings, and the sound of distant gunfire drifted in from those directions. The small farmers and ranchers didn't know what to expect or think, and most of them were ready to go home, put down their guns and start packing. The strain was breaking the homestead men, driving the women to distraction, and terrifying the children, even those too young to know what it was all about.

Young Gary Shelstad and Riddick, once their assailants withdrew, apparently pulling out across the river, were free to ride on to the bridge. Dulaney was dead on the barn floor. The house, burned nearly to the ground now, was still too hot to approach. Gary felt with sickening surety that his father's bones were in that

furnace, but Riddick stoutly maintained that Dave had escaped. They found a dead horse at the brink of the ravine behind the homestead, but if there were any dead raiders they had been carried away. The horse bore a brand that was unknown to Gary and Rid. . . . Back in the saddle they pushed southward toward the Crossing.

Trouble had been expected to start at the bridge, but all seemed quiet down that way. Gary sniffed the night air for the scent of sheep, thinking that Pickrell might have crossed already, but all he could smell was the black evil odor of fire, charred wood and smoke, soot and ruin. He was afraid that reek would remain with him the rest of his life.

Riding in toward the bridgeway they were relieved to see the barricade still intact and manned, no sheep in view and no signs of strife as yet. The porch rail of the Crossing was lined with cowboys, and a laughing voice greeted the new arrivals: "Two more heroes come to hold the fort!" An empty bottle flashed through the moonlit air and exploded beside the trail, making the horses shy and prance skittishly. Gary and Riddick eyed the long line of laughing mocking A-Bar men on the saloon veranda. Millikan, and Trilli were in this bunch . . . The nesters at the barrier stood up as Gary and Riddick stepped out of their saddles. Gary observed that the guards were near the cracking point, nervous, distraught and fearful.

"What happened up-river, boys?" asked Elvidge, a fussy little fellow who considered himself a leader.

"They burnt out Riddick's place and ours," Gary Shelstad said. "Killed Bondelid, Dulaney—and maybe my father."

A gasp of dismay murmured through the ranks. Elvidge said, "That's just what'll happen to all of us. We was about ready to pull outa here, boys. Ain't no sense in us fightin' Alberon's battle. If the ranchers don't want sheep let *them* stop Pickrell!" A mutter of assent followed his words. The homesteaders were ready to give up.

McLatchy pointed to the Crossing. "Look at them cowhands. If we started fightin' Pickrell they'd most likely plug us in the back."

"All right," Gary said, weary of the whole affair. "Go on home if you want. Rid and I'll stick around here."

"Hold on a minute!" cried Nealon. "Somebody's comin' across!"

All eyes turned across the wide silver-dappled river and saw a company of horsemen on the opposite shore, looming large and dark, an overwhelming force. "Hundreds of 'em!" somebody mumbled. Then a high clear voice sounded over the rippling water:

"This is Pickrell. I'm comin' over with two men. Three of you walk out and meet us. Time to talk things over here."

"Come on, Rid," said Gary. "You and I. Who else wants to come?"

"I do," the mild Farish said surprisingly.

"Watch close out there," warned Riddick. "They may try somethin'."

The night was silent except for the running water and the slow tramp of boots on the bridge, even the raucous noise from the saloon dying out as the two trios paced toward each other and met about mid-stream. Pickrell was a tall skinny man with a long neck and small birdlike head, his face sad and homely, squint-eyed. with a huge blade of a nose and a broad buck-toothed mouth.

Gravely he introduced the two flanking him, Lemoyne and Peale, gunmen of great renown. Then Pickrell went on, "We could cross any time. We got the men and guns. But regardless of my reputation that ain't the way I do business. I know what most of you've got—a shanty, barn, maybe forty or fifty head of stock. I'm offerin' three-thousand dollars per homestead."

Gary Shelstad licked his dry lips. "Does that go for the places you burnt out tonight?"

Pickrell shook his high head and grimaced as if in pain. "Son, my riders ain't been over on your side—yet. That's God's truth. Did you ever think of lookin' behind you for your enemies?" He gestured awkwardly with an enormous hand.

FOR some reason Gary believed the man, and looking at Riddick and Farish he saw that they too thought Pickrell was telling the truth.

"I know how you folks feel about bein'

shoved around," Pickrell said. "I been up against the same thing all my life. Pushed, driven, beaten and kicked to hell-and-gone all over the country. What I want now is a piece of land big enough for my sheep, nothin' more. I don't want the whole basin. I ain't aimin' to drive out cattle and turn this into sheep country. I just want a place to ranch."

"Where'll we go if we sell out?" Riddick asked.

Pickrell smiled sorrowfully. "I know, boys. Nesters ain't wanted any more'n sheepmen are. If you'd let me through you wouldn't have to sell out. I'd take back the land that belonged to me once. You know the Bench, A-Bar graze now? . . . That was mine years ago. Alberon took it away from me. That's really what I came here for, to get my own claim back from Alberon."

Gary Shelstad was remembering many things all at once. What they knew of Pickrell had come almost entirely from A-Bar gossip, spread maliciously among the homesteaders. And tonight those masked riders had been Alberon men, killing and burning under the guise of Pickrell's crew, and that rescue party Ace Alberon pulled had been framed to impress Kay Kress. Gary saw it clearly now. He glanced at Riddick, and they both nodded understandingly.

"Why not let 'em through?" Farish blurted. "A-Bar's nothin' to us but misery. Alberon's no friend of ours."

"Yeah, I reckon it can be arranged all right," Riddick drawled.

"Give us a little time," Gary said. "We want to explain and talk things over with the others."

"Why, sure," Pickrell agreed. "Sure you do, boys. I ain't tryin' to push you. But you know what it means if you let us by? You'll have to fight Alberon."

Gary smiled thinly. "We've got to do that anyway."

"Glad you're beginnin' to see it," Pickrell said, "before Alberon wipes you out. When I saw them fires tonight and heard the shootin' I had an idea what was goin' on. They kill any of your people?"

"Two men," Gary said. "Maybe three."

"That's Alberon's way," said Pickrell. "Life never meant nothin' to the Alberons. You folks'll have to watch out tonight. You sleep on it, boys, and we'll have another talk tomorrow. We'll camp close to the bridge, in case they start any war."

At that moment, as the two groups were parting in the middle of the bridge, gunshots boomed in the Crossing Saloon.

"It's startin' now," Riddick said softly.

"I reckon so," said Pickrell, and for the first time his bony-beaked face lost a little of that morbid unhappiness. "You'll maybe need a little help, if you don't mind up stringin' along."

CHAPTER THREE

Guns of His Father

ACE ALBERON stood at the bar in the Crossing drinking whiskey with Iverson and Burkhard. Except for them and Lendrum, the huge bald-headed, bland-faced proprietor, the room was empty, the other A-Bar hands taking their drinks on the porch where they could watch the nesters at the barricade and the meeting on the bridge. Alberon, hat pushed back on his glossy black curls, wore a sulky frown on his handsome face.

"Never should've let 'em get to Pickrell," he said again.

Iverson laughed. "What the hell, Ace? If it looks like they made any agreement with Pickrell we'll clean 'em out tonight."

"We'll have to," Alberon said. "Get rid of them before we take on Pickrell. Somethin' went wrong tonight, I don't know just what."

"Mistake to leave young Shelstad and Riddick alive," growled Burkhard.

"We couldn't very well kill them in front of Kay," Ace protested.

"They was pinned down in Shelstad's barn though," Burkhard said. "We ought to finished them right there."

"And lost half-a-dozen men gettin' two?" Ace said. "We can do bettern'n that, Burk."

"Old man Shelstad got away too," Iverson reminded them.

Alberon laughed and spat into the sawdust. "He don't count, Ivy."

Strayer leaned in the front doorway. "Still gabbin' out there, Ace."

"Keep an eye on 'em, Slim," Alberon advised. "Watch when they come back. If we can't tell from the way they act we'll

damned quick get it out of Elvidge."

"You boys fixin' to lose me some customers?" Lendrum inquired from behind the bar.

"Your ears are gettin' too long, Len," Ace Alberon told him.

Lendrum's broad face colored. "This is still my barroom, Ace."

"And we're your best trade," Alberon said. "So don't hear too much and don't talk at all, Lendrum."

The big man, lips compressed and eyes slitted, went on wiping the bar with hard, sweeping strokes.

The back door opened and the three men in front of the bar stiffened as Dave Shelstad slid inside and pushed the door shut with his foot, walking toward them with a gun in each hand and another sheathed on his right leg. Dave looked and moved like a different man, and they stared wonderingly at him as he paused at the end of counter. He stood straighter, bigger, with a new tough assurance.

"Keep your hands on the wood, boys," Dave said, and laid the two guns on the bar. "You've seen these irons before?" They all gazed at the bone-handled Colts. "Whitey Whitesell's," Dave went on coolly. "He was with the bunch that burned me out tonight. Had he gone over to Pickrell, Ace?"

"Not that I know of," Alberon mumbled.

"No, he was still on the A-Bar payroll, I reckon," Dave said. "Even if he was masqueradin' as a Pickrell man. Well, the game's all over, Alberon. *Call off your dogs out front if you want to stay alive!*"

"You're crazy man," Alberon panted, stalling for time. "You—"

"Yell out and tell 'em to dust home!" Dave Shelstad said. "Or I'll give you what you got comin', you yellow hound!" He was standing easily at the end of the bar, both hands out of sight below the wood, Whitesell's bone-handled weapons lying before him.

Alberon's mouth was opening to shout when the sullen black-bearded Burkhard made his move, right hand dropping quickly. Dave Shelstad's right hand came up with his own .44 in it and flame leaped along the bar with a thunderous crash. Burkhard gasped, spun half-around, doubled up and fired into the floor as he collapsed face down in the sawdust.

ALBERON ducked and bolted for a side window, but the reckless Iverson wheeled away from the bar and made his desperate play, drawing with lightning speed. But Dave blasted him before he could trigger, and when Iverson's gun did roar the bullet only raked a furrow across the bar and shattered glasses behind it. Iverson rocked back on his heels from the impact and sprawled across a table, firing once more straight up at the ceiling, twisting and rolling heavily to the floor, never moving again.

Alberon had plunged out through the window, carrying glass and sash along with him. Strayer appeared in the front doorway, gun flaming, but Dave Shelstad had switched his Colt in that direction and was fanning the hammer with his left hand. The reports rolled into a long shattering concussion, fire stabbing across the room, and Strayer was smashed backward onto the veranda, falling flat there.

Other guns were blazing through the

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doorway when Lendrum calmly shot out the lamps and then turned his gun on the entrance. Dave Shelstad, crouching behind the corner of the bar, sheathed his empty .44 and cut loose the two Colts he had taken from Whitesell. The porch was a chaos of running, scrambling, cursing men as Dave and Lendrum swept it clear with their deadly crossfire, and the fight was taken up outside with the A-Bar hands scattering in all directions, lashing shots toward the nesters at the bridge.

Sighing wearily, weak and sick and shaken now that it was over, Dave Shelstad stood upright, laid the empty pair of revolvers on the wood, and moved along the bar to meet Lendrum. The big proprietor smiled sweatily in the dimness and set out a bottle of whiskey. The battle was raging outside along the riverbank.

"Drink hearty, Dave," said Lendrum. "If ever a man deserved one you sure as hell do. Never saw anythin' like it, Dave. And I never knew you was a gunfighter."

"I'm not, really," Dave murmured, tilting the bottle. "But there's times when a man has to stand up and fight."

"You hit here just in time, Dave," Lendrum told him. "They was figurin' on wipin' all you people out."

"I know—now," said Dave. "And we all thought it was Pickrell."

The room reeked with powdersmoke, the fumes aching in Dave's head, but the whiskey cleared some of them away. The guns were still barking and booming outside, muzzle-blasts slashing the night with lightning, and Dave Shelstad drank again and moved toward the door. Lendrum upended the bottle and lumbered after him, carrying a sawed-off shotgun this time.

"Too bad that young Alberon got away," Lendrum muttered.

Dave nodded. "But maybe he'll run into somebody out there."

The rear door opened behind them, and Dave and Lendrum turned and saw a high dark figure there holding two guns on them. Damn careless of us, Dave thought. But anyway, I did some fighting tonight and my boy'll hear of it. . . .

GARY SHELSTAD and the others on the bridge, running hard with Gary in the lead, reached shore in time to meet a burst of gunfire from the saloon veranda. Bullets beat the barricade as they fanned out along it, and on the other side Gary saw Elvidge go down clawing at his throat. The other nesters were scrambling desperately away from their exposed position, and more men fell as they fled, screaming and slithering down the steep riverbank.

Gary and Riddick threw a couple of shots at the Crossing, then plunged through the opening in the barrier, the sheepmen crowding after them. Little Farish, mounting the barricade in his eagerness, was shot off the top, bouncing and splashing into the water. Gary stumbled over a limp form and glimpsed McLatchy's face in the moonlight. Gary and Riddick drove on toward the saloon, trailed by Pickrell and his two hands. The night became a crazy roaring chaos. All Gary thought of was getting at the Alberons, and he lost track of the shots he hammered at them.

A-Bar men were piling off the porch now, hurdling the rail, leaping down the steps, tumbling and rolling as bullets caught them on their way to the terrified horses at the long racks. Gary leveled his gun as Millikan came at him on the run. The jetting flame seemed to hold Millikan suspended momentarily before he crumpled. Gary went on, some impulse driving him toward the rear of the embattled building.

Riddick crouched to match shots with the dodging Trilli, and Trilli went down as if tripped by a wire. Pickrell, Lemoyne and Peale were dropping A-Bar hands at the foot of the stairway. Everything was lost in a wild racing tumult of shots and yells. A few Alberon men got away on their horses only to run into a fresh burst of fire as they hit the road: Old Brent linger and young Norfleet, come hell-for-leather out of the north with Kay Kress beside them.

Gary Shelstad rounded the rear corner of the Crossing and saw a familiar figure reach the back door and poise there, a gun in either hand. Gary shouted pantingly and Ace Alberon whirled to face him across the length of the building. Still running, Gary triggered first, but his hammer clicked on an empty shell. Gary hurled his gun with furious strength and

went into a headlong dive as Alberon's guns blasted.

Ace, dodging away from the doorway, ducked directly into the flying weapon. It smashed his chest with shocking force, and his shots went high as he reeled backward, the breath beaten from his lungs. Before Alberon could recover and fire again Gary had rolled to his feet and reached Ace with a tremendous tiger-leap. The impact knocked Alberon flat on his back, while Gary hurtled on over and beyond him.

Both recovered with remarkable quickness and met again, Gary flinging himself along the ground as Alberon rolled onto his knees. Ace had lost his left-hand gun and Gary was in on him before he could fire the other. Ace's right hand whipped up, the barrel slashed Gary's cheek as he closed in, flattening Alberon once more and tearing the gun from his fingers. Gary let the Colt go and lashed both fists to the face as they thrashed on the turf. There were men standing over them now, but neither combatant was aware of spectators or anything else but annihilation.

They fought like animals bent on maiming, rending and destroying, and the earth was torn under their flailing limbs. It was fist and elbow, boot and knee, shoulder and hip as they smashed each other back and forth in moonlight and shadow, a raw primitive struggle for survival. Blood poured from their faces, clothing hung in tattered shreds, and breath came in agonized sobs. It was so brutal that onlookers turned away here and there, but when men moved to stop it Dave Shelstad himself restrained them. This had been a long time coming, and it was best to let it go.

They were on their feet again, weaving in exhaustion, when Gary summoned strength from somewhere to strike cleanly for the jaw. Alberon's head jerked and his legs folded. It seemed to be over and watchers sighed in relief, but as Gary swayed in Ace lashed out with both boots. Caught in the groin and doubled with grinding pain, Gary was kicked back against the wall and held himself half-upright there with a supreme effort.

Alberon was scrambling to rise when Gary somehow threw himself forward and swung his right foot squarely into Ace's chin. Alberon collapsed as if shot through the brain. Gary fell on top of him, clutching for the throat. He would have finished it then, but a hand gripped his shoulder. Gary looked up through blood-blinded eyes and saw at last the miracle of his father standing there, alive and well, smiling down at him, grave and proud.

"That's enough, son," Dave said.

"Dad," the boy gasped. "Thank God!" And he toppled senseless over his unconscious and nearly dead enemy.

LATER, inside the Crossing and somewhat restored, Gary Shelstad blinked at his father. "You started this war in here, Dad?" he asked wonderingly.

"Started it and damn near finished it!" Lendrum said. "Hell on wheels, your old man is. Three of 'em he took, just like that, Gary. Three of the toughest ones."

Gary tried to smile with swollen lacerated lips but the pain of his deep-gashed cheek was too severe. The pride and happiness showed in his bruised eyes, however, and that was enough for his father.

"Guess I got kinda mad when they burned the place, Gary," said Dave Shelstad. "Mad enough to fight some anyway."

"We'll build again, Dave," Riddick drawled in his soft tone. "Throw in together if you want to. It'll be a different basin with Pickrell here and no more trouble with A-Bar."

"Never knew it was sheep we needed," Gary said slowly. "But then, we never knew there were sheepmen like Pickrell."

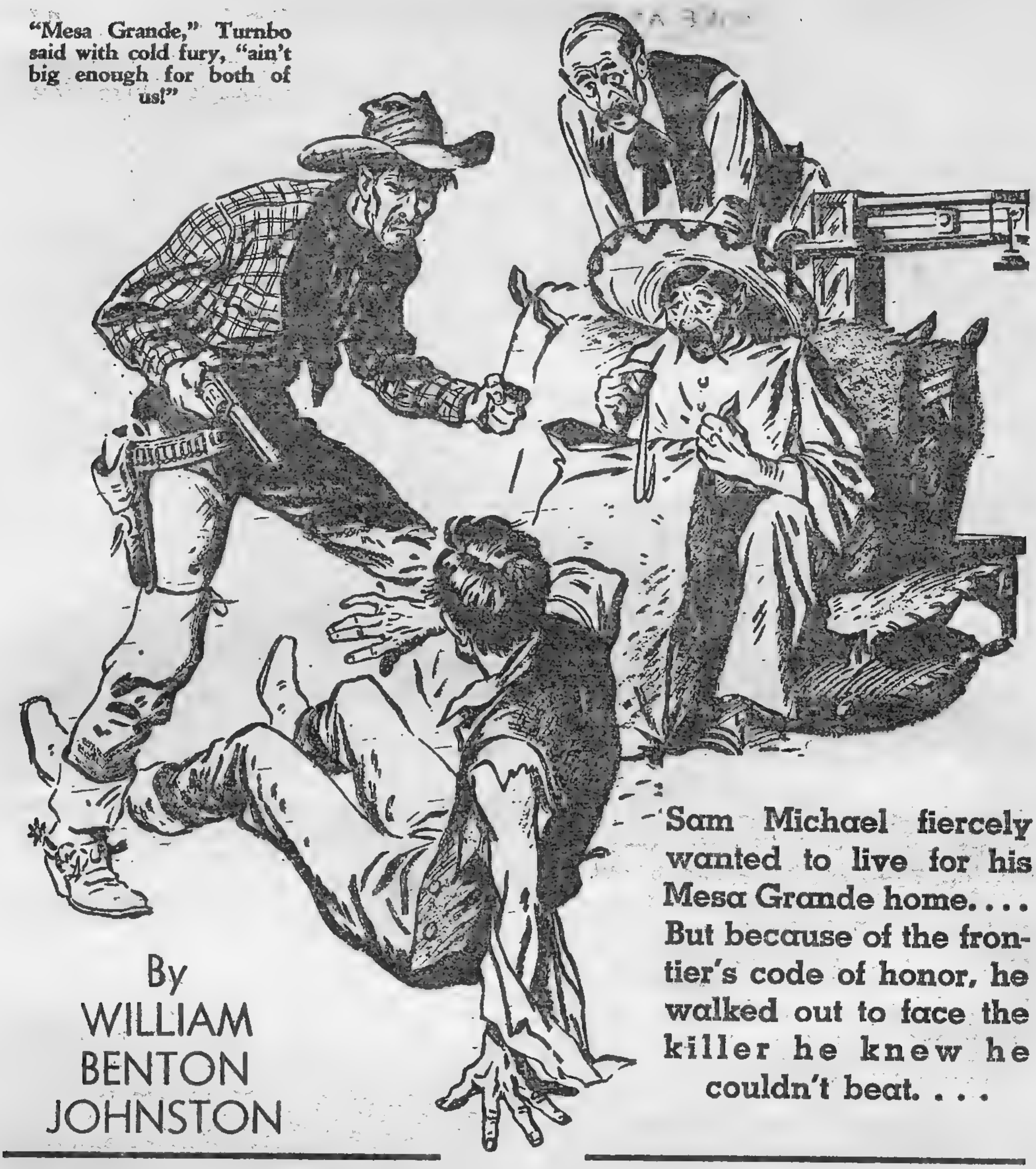
Pickrell came in shortly afterward, towering above Peale and Lemoyne, a slight smile on his wide homely mouth. "I'd sure like to set 'em up for some fightin' men here," Pickrell said.

"On the house," Lendrum told him. "For anybody that helped beat A-Bar tonight."

"We didn't do nothin' much." Pickrell shrugged his high bony shoulders. "These folks here done it up nice and brown. I'm some glad we ain't goin' to have to fight any nesters in Brockaway. Especially some of the older folks, from what I hear."

Pickrell grinned and raised his glass to Dave Shelstad and everybody in the barroom followed suit.

THE END



"Mesa Grande," Turnbo said with cold fury, "ain't big enough for both of us!"

Sam Michael fiercely wanted to live for his Mesa Grande home.... But because of the frontier's code of honor, he walked out to face the killer he knew he couldn't beat....

By
WILLIAM
BENTON
JOHNSTON

HEAT of afternoon lay mercilessly upon the streets of Mesa Grande, but inside Bethel's Feed Store, where Sam Michael and Lopez Estanos were working, thick walls held back the sun's glare, and there was a musty coolness from stored grain and frequent sprinklings of the floor.

When old Wade Bethel came in from the street, Sam was weighing out wheat and Lopez was sewing a sack, kneeling beside it.

GUNSMOKE ANGELUS AT MESA GRANDE

Bethel stood a moment, watching them. Then he said, "Jim Turnbo is back in town—he's already asked about you, Sam."

Sam's scoop stopped in mid-stroke; Lopez held his needle poised above the sack, the thread loose and undrawn. That interval of stillness, then Sam went on filling bags and Lopez drew tight the slack thread. Bethel mounted the high stool at his desk, busying himself with the store's books.

Sam finished his task, pushed back the scales. "I heard that Jim was out of prison," he said, and began stacking the bags Lopez had sewn.

Bethel turned on the stool. "A pardon, and a damned fool one, too. Jim's always been a trouble-maker and always will be as long as he lives. We got rid of him once by fair trial. A pity the Territory governor didn't leave him to rot in Yuma." He peered over his glasses at Sam. "Watch out for Jim Turnbo, son; stay away from him."

Sam stacked the last bag. "We never would have broken up the old rimrock gangs if somebody hadn't gone into court against 'em. Jim knows my testimony sent him down to Yuma, but he knows, too, that every word I told was the truth. So I'm not looking for trouble with him, but I'm not dodging him, either."

Lopez said, "Señor," with soft urgency. A slight movement of his head drew Sam's attention to the door.

Jim Turnbo had stepped in from the street, pausing there to let his eyes become accustomed to the glareless light of the building. This Jim Turnbo was a tall man, lean-waisted and broad of shoulder. There was an arrogant wildness about him: it was in the coldness of his pale gray eyes, in the way he wore his hat pushed back, and in the meticulous slant and tie of his low-slung holster.

He now walked unhurriedly back to where Sam Michael stood beside the stacked bags of grain.

"I thought about you a lot while I was down at Yuma," he said, and his arrogance was further manifest in a faint smiling and a lazy insolence of speech. "About the trial and about you fellows who joined the Citizens League to clean up the town—law and order and all that damned stuff. You're a great bunch of boys!"

Sam said, "Now, listen, Jim—" but Turnbo kept on talking. "So now you've got a couple of churches and a school, and Nelle Gorman's big house in the Hollow is closed. Understand you've done all right for yourself, too: running this store for Bethel, building a new house across the creek and fixing to marry Ann Whitson, the schoolteacher." Turnbo's smile faded and his voice turned harsh and razor sharp. "But you didn't figure on Jim Turnbo getting pardoned and coming back, did you? Well, I'm here, and you ain't running no more stores in this town or living in no new house, or climbing in bed with no—"

Sam shoved away from the feed bags and hit him. It was a fast, hard-driven blow and Turnbo staggered, but his long left arm reached out and his fingers clutched the front of Sam's shirt. Sam swung again, but Turnbo pulled him off balance and he missed. Then Turnbo's gun was out. Twice it smashed against Sam's head, and he reeled back, clutching at the feed bags for support. Blood seeped down from his hairline; with slow, awkward fingers he wiped it away.

WILDNESS now ran high in Turnbo, showing bleakly in his features. "Mesa Grande," he said with cold fury, "ain't big enough for both of us, not even for one day. I can't kill you now, 'cause you ain't packing a gun, but by God I can run you out of town. When the ten o'clock train leaves tonight, be on it. If you ain't, I'm coming after you. Wherever you are, I'm coming after you, even if you're hiding behind that schoolma'am's petticoats."

Sam took a step away from the stack of bags. Without this support, he stood unsteadily. Again he slowly wiped blood from his face. "I'll be at the hotel," he told Turnbo evenly, "and you won't have to come after me. When you start up the street, I'll come down to meet you."

"Hell," Turnbo said contemptuously, "you'll turn your tail and run for the train, that's what you'll do—but we'll see."

He turned and showed the other two men a first moment of attention. Lopez' eyes shifted away from that fierce glance, but old Wade Bethel pulled down his

glasses and returned the look with an unperturbed and incurious stare.

"I was a Citizen Leaguer, too," he said mildly.

"That's just what I was thinking," Turnbo replied, then wheeled away and walked out to the street.

Lopez helped wash the cut in Sam's scalp, and Bethel swabbed on turpentine, there being no immediate talk between them.

Finally Bethel said, "Yes, we've got churches and a school, and a circuit judge holds court here once in a while, but the old, wild days are not entirely over. A man is challenged by another and our code makes him accept, and there's nothing anybody can do about it—we haven't come that far yet. Still, Sam, you might try asking Sheriff Lozier to—"

"No," Sam said sharply. Then in a more moderate tone: "That would just be putting it off, Wade."

"In bright moonlight," Lopez suggested, "a Weenchester, she stop a man walking toward the hotel while he ees a long way off."

Sam shook his head and Bethel said, "Shut up, Lopez. "The Mexican shrugged and began sewing sacks again, bewildered by the loco ethics of gringos.

Bethel opened his safe and took out a gun belt. "This holster," he told Sam, "is soft and smooth. The action of the old Colt is easy and fast."

Sam said, "Thanks," and buckled on the belt, knowing full well that against Jim Turnbo it made no difference what kind of gun he carried.

After the store was closed, Sam went to his room. He stretched out on the bed, resting until the throbbing pain in his temples subsided. But disturbing thoughts were a constant and nagging presence, and finally he got up, shaved and put on fresh clothing. It was late afternoon when he left the hotel and crossed Stony Creek, going up to his almost finished house.

Evening's still hour was at hand, and across the flatlands westward bear grass lifted its white blooms amid the gray-green of mesquite. Back in the town, mission bells rang the *Angelus*.

This tranquility moved in contrasting force against the turbulence in Sam Michael's mind, turning him to a poignant remembering of all that this house meant to him—and to Ann Whitson. He thought, with sharp bitterness, of how swiftly a dream could fade and of how insecure was man in his planning for the future.

Only yesterday he and Ann had been here, and he remembered how she had looked at the house and how its promise had brought a shine of happiness to her eyes. He remembered her saying, "We shall give to this place love and laughter and goodness. And it shall give us good things: children and friendly neighbors and the joy of our being together, every day and every night."

But that had been yesterday, and now Sam must place on the scales the stark realism of Jim Turnbo's prowess with weapons. For he had seen Turnbo meet the Texas gunslick, Reed Thomas; had seen Thomas, his own Colt unfired, reel back to cough out his life's blood on the porch of Grant's Emporium. He knew all the old, wild stories and he recalled the day when Turnbo reached Frank Hennessey with a revolver slug at eighty full paces, then while Hennessey swayed against the wall of Crain's Blacksmith Shop, ineffectually returning the fire, Turnbo walked closer to send a second bullet into Hennessey's brain. Turnbo was deadly.

AGAINST these things Sam impartially weighed his own chances, and the balancing was plain and grim and unescapable. For the code of this strong, raw land was a part of Sam Michael. He had lived quietly and decently, he was young and in love and did not want to die, but it was not in him to think beyond an acceptance of that code. The code was life—and death.

Yet it was difficult to integrate all this with the plans he and Ann had made, inconceivable that anything so harsh and ugly should touch and hurt her. Ann, who was kind and sweet and good. He thought of how gentle and patient she was in the school room, of how children loved and trusted her. He thought of her walking home from church, tall and straight, with her Bible tucked beneath her arm. He remembered how it was, walking with her on those Sunday mornings; he re-

membered her slow smile and the sound of her quiet laughter. Abruptly Sam walked away from the unfinished house.

It was full dark when he came to the Whitson home, and lamplight was already making its yellow shine against the windows. He stepped up to the porch, and before he could knock Ann came to the door.

Looking at Ann, Sam saw in her all the things he wanted to see in a woman. She had poise and dignity and a grave gentleness. Yet there was also about her something provocative.

She said, "Come in, Sam," and he stepped inside and closed the door.

He touched her shoulder with an old, familiar gesture, showing her his usual easy smile. But he saw the pale set of her features and how darkly trouble lay in her eyes, and knew that she had heard of what had happened in Bethel's Store that afternoon.

Ann waited a full minute, then said slowly, "It's all so hard to believe. Like a bad dream that—oh, Sam, what are we going to do?"

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "Everything will be all right," and instantly realized how inane was this answer.

Sam looked at this room which was so familiar to him. It was here that he had come to see Ann when their friendship was young. It was here that he had first kissed her and told her that he loved her. It was a big room, with a scatter of hooked rugs on the floor. The sofa and the great, heavy chairs, the bookcase and the desk, all brought from far-off Boston.

In the center of the room was a massive oak table and on it a square-base, tall-chimneyed lamp. Beyond these, the broad rock fireplace, now bright with the kindling flames. Above the mantel were matching spike horns, supporting an English shotgun which had belonged to Ann's father.

Looking at these things, thinking how each seemed a part of the pleasant hours he had spent in Ann's home, Sam allowed an interlude of silence to build up, unrelieved save for the crackling of the fire. Ann turned and put both hands on his arm.

She spoke faster than Sam had ever heard her speak, and her words were thinly edged with panic. "You mustn't go through with this, Sam. If you meet Jim Turnbo in the street tonight, it will be the end of everything for you—and for me."

He showed her a startled attention, amazed at such a break in her habitual calmness and reserve. She saw that and paused, thereafter speaking more quietly.

"We musn't let Turnbo do this to us. It's so foolish." Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Mesa Grande is just a town, Sam. There are other places, better places. I would go with you—anywhere—and we would take our happiness with us. We could build another house and—oh, Sam, it's so useless, so—"

HER voice faltered and stopped. She had watched him closely as she spoke and she saw his features change with the swift rise of hard, stubborn pride. There was in her a profound knowledge of men like Sam, and she knew how deep and painful was the touching of that pride.

He slowly built a cigarette, his handling of the paper and tobacco deliberately slow. When it was finished, he said, "Running away wouldn't do any good. There would be other times, in other places. I have to live with myself and have some respect for myself, no matter what I lose."

She drew a long, unsteady breath, then got up and crossed the room, going out to the porch. Sam followed and stood beside her, his arm lightly around her shoulders. He threw away the unlighted cigarette. "Some things," he told her gently, "a man must do, Ann."

She did not reply and for a while there was no further talk between them.

The moon was not yet up, and early night lay about them in a smother of blackness. A small wind now moved over the land, and there was a scent of sage and wildrose.

Ann's stillness left her in a sudden lifting of her shoulders. Sam felt her body grow taut.

He held her closer. "What is it, Ann?"

She said, her voice one tone above a whisper, "Yes, Sam, there *are* things one must do. The privilege to live decently and happily are ours only if we defend that privilege, for ourselves and for others. I remember Father saying that it is our inalienable right to have and to hold the good and honorable things in life

—and to fight for them, if necessary. I know now that there can be no putting off Jim Turnbo, or any running away from him. I was afraid, Sam, but I'm not afraid anymore."

Sam drew a breath of relief. "That," he told her, "is what I wanted you to understand."

He put his other arm around her, turned her to him and kissed her. Their lips held hard together for a long interval, Sam storing in his mind all the beauty of that swiftly passing minute. He wanted to tell her again how much he loved her, how much her love meant to him and that he deeply regretted bringing this sorrow to her. He wanted to leave with this gentle, sensitive girl a message that would somehow shield her against the hours of suspense between now and ten o'clock.

Presently he lifted his head, said, "Good-by, Ann," and kissed her again. Abruptly he turned away to the house, got his hat and went quickly down the steps.

A FEW minutes before ten o'clock, Sam came out of Brandon's Hotel and stood idly on the porch, the tip of his shoulder slanted against the hotel wall.

Presently the eastbound train came in, and went on. The moon was up now, full and bright, and its light was like a silver mist, save where buildings of the town cast their long black shadows. News of Turnbo's threat had spread; Mesa Grande's one street was deserted and ominously quiet.

Noise of the departing train diminished against the desert's floor, and the long-drawn, melancholy sound of its whistle drifted back from the far distance. Sam moved away from the wall so that he could see the length of the street, and he stood like that until the batwing doors of the King's Palace Saloon swung open and Jim Turnbo came out and walked toward the hotel. Whereupon Sam stepped down from the porch and went to meet him.

Sam felt no bravery and no particular fear, felt nothing except a sharp, bitter sense of disaster. In a strange, detached manner he took inordinate notice of all the familiar things around him: the small, usual noises that echoed against the edge of the night, the pale, lighted square of windows at the saloon and at the depot. Back in the hotel, a door slammed noisily, and far down the street, someone carrying a lantern crossed the open hallway of Tolliver's Livery Barn.

Sam, walking steadily, was now opposite Grant's Emporium. Turnbo came on more hurriedly, his hat pushed far back on his head and a wild, keen eagerness driving him. His boots made rapid, muffled sounds in the street's deep dust, and pride constrained Sam to a quickening of his own pace.

The separating distance fell away to no more than a hundred yards. Turnbo walked with his arms swinging loosely, yet Sam, remembering this man's lightning draw against Reed Thomas and the accuracy of his long-range fire at Frank Hennessey, lifted Wade Bethel's revolver from its holster. The smooth action of the old Colt made a faint, metallic rip as Sam drew back the hammer.

In the bright moonlight, Turnbo saw that move and his laughter rang out harshly and contemptuously. Disdaining to touch his own weapon so soon, he came on, still swinging his arms.

He was like that when a long flash of fire stabbed out redly from the deep-shadowed alley beyond the blacksmith shop, and the heavy boom of a shotgun rolled and echoed against the tall false-fronts of the stores.

Turnbo stopped, jerked stiffly erect as if slapped by some strong, unseen hand. The pushed-back hat slipped from his head. He made an unsteady turn, went a few steps back along the way he had come, then staggered and slumped face downward in the dust. His knees drew up and straightened convulsively, throwing him over on his back. After that, he lay quiet and unmoving.

Acrid fumes of burnt powder tainted the night air; men rushed out of the saloon and up the street. Some one from the hotel, passing where Sam stood, said, "Thank God you got him, Sam."

Sheriff Lozier and two of his deputies left the jail and came across by the depot, without hurry or excitement. Sam put away his gun and went to where the crowd was gathering.

Sheriff Lozier said, "Stand back," and stooped for a close look at Turnbo.

There were six small crimson spots on

the front of Turnbo's shirt, and that same bright color seeped from a hole in his throat.

"Dead as a doornail," the sheriff pronounced.

Sam pushed through the circle of men. "Somebody shot him from that alley, Sheriff. I didn't get close enough—I didn't do it."

Lozier straightened up. "'Course you didn't," he agreed dryly. "A Colt .45 ain't apt to be loaded with buckshot, even in Mesa Grande."

He and his deputies walked into the alley from where the hidden gunman had fired, finding nothing but silence and deep, dark shadows.

They came back to the crowd, and a man asked, "Who you reckon done it, Sheriff? We didn't hear no horse leaving; must have been some town feller, a-foot."

Lozier took out a handkerchief and wiped his hands. "*Somebody* had to shoot Jim Turnbo, sooner or later," he said irritably. "It might have been any one of a dozen people. He was the last of the old wild, lawless crowd, and personally I don't give a damn who killed him—or why."

THE deputies lifted Turnbo's body and followed the sheriff toward Samuels' undertaker shop. The crowd began to break up, and somebody asked Sam to have a drink.

He said, "Thanks, not now," and walked slowly down toward Stony Creek, his mind still dulled by the swift, inexplicable turn of events.

He thought of how Ward Bethel had looked at Turnbo, of how still and unfathomable the old man's eyes had been when he told Turnbo, "I was a Citizen Leaguer, too." Then there was Lopez Estanos. Lopez was Sam's friend to a point of dogged devotion. And Lopez was a taciturn, unpredictable man, with a long, smoky trail behind him. Sam recalled how earnestly he made the suggestion about the Winchester rifle. And there must, of course, be considered the fact that Frank Hennessey had a brother living in Mesa Grande; further, any Texan drifting through could have been a compadre of the notorious Reed Thomas. As Sheriff Lozier had said, it might have been any of a dozen people.

Engrossed with these speculations, Sam came to the creek and crossed it. This familiar way brought suddenly to him the realization that Ann had heard that single gun blast, and of what a perturbing message it must have carried to her. At a full run he went northward along the creek toward her house.

He paused at the yard gate to regain his breath. Then he went on to the house and opened the door without knocking.

Ann sat in a chair by the fireplace. He had expected her to leap up at the sight of him, but she only turned and stared. She was so pale, and she held herself in control with such obvious effort that he moved quickly across the room, lifted her erect and sheltered her in his arms.

"It's all over," he told her quietly, "and I'm not hurt. Somebody else was after Turnbo, too. They waited in an alley and shot him as he passed."

Ann pressed her face hard against his shoulder. "Is he—is Turnbo—?"

"Yes," Sam said, "he's dead," and was disturbed at the violent trembling of her body.

"Don't, Ann," he said gently. "There's nothing to be afraid of now." He patted her shoulder and pressed his lips against her hair. "A man doesn't know how sweet is love and happiness until he stands to lose those things. I love you more now than I've ever loved you. Let's always remember this night and how we—"

She drew back from him, shaking her head. "No," she said sharply. "Let's not remember anything about this night. Let's forget it, let's never think of it again, or speak of it again, as long as we live."

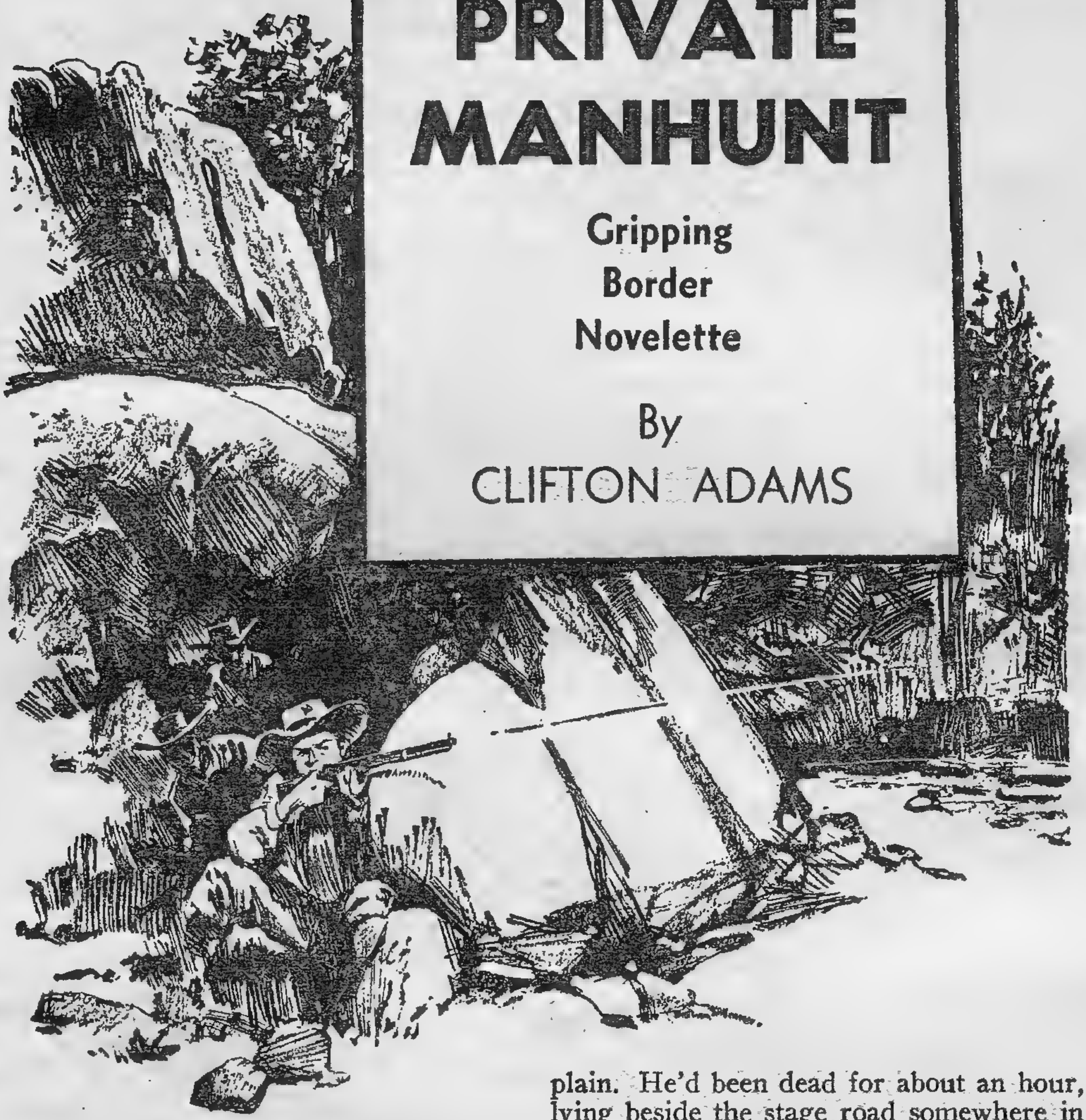
He saw how agitated she was, and he thought of how trying those long hours of helpless waiting had been to her. With a complete and never to be corrected misconception, he said, "All right, Ann. I understand how you feel and we'll never mention it again—never."

His arms tightened about her, and she lifted her own arms to return that close embrace, steeling herself against the pain in her right shoulder, a shoulder badly bruised and already turning sore from the hard recoil of a shotgun.

PRIVATE MANHUNT

Gripping Border Novelette

By CLIFTON ADAMS



CHAPTER ONE

Hot Blood—Cold Lead

HE WAS a little man, about fifty I guessed, with a frayed-out mustache and two clear blue eyes that had got all out of whack and lost their focus. He wore a neat serge suit and a string tie, and underneath the suit there was a buckskin vest. That vest of his had cost more than my whole rig. It was too bad somebody had put a bullet hole in it.

But he wasn't in any condition to complain. He'd been dead for about an hour, lying beside the stage road somewhere in the middle of Texas. I didn't know how he got there. I didn't care. Finding a corpse never got anybody anything but trouble, and I'd already had my share of that.

If they had let me alone I would have left him there. I would have got on my horse and gone on to where I was going and let it go at that. That would have been fine, if it had worked out.

The first shot almost took my head off. The bullet smacked through the crown of my hat like a deer-fly with a full head of steam, and I hit the ground. That surprise shot threw a wrench in my thinking machinery and before I got it to work-

ing again a voice said, "All right, stand up. You're not hurt."

He was more certain about that than I was. But I did like he said. I stood up.

He came out of a dry wash about fifty yards back from the road, a short, apple-cheeked man who wasn't any taller than the little corpse at my feet, but heftier around the middle. He carried a snub-barreled carbine in his arms. He had the kind of eyes you almost never see: dazzling green, with wrinkles around them that came from laughing a lot.

But he wasn't laughing as he stood there looking at me. Two more men came out of hiding in the dry wash, carrying .45s nervously and looking as if they would rather be somewhere else.

"I didn't expect a parade," I said. "Do strangers always get receptions like this in your part of the country?"

His face showed nothing. He said, "Tell me more. About being a stranger."

I noticed then what I should have noticed at first, the silver star pinned to his vest, right over the heart. He looked more like a family doctor than a sheriff, but he didn't have to convince me that he had talent for shooting a carbine.

I said, "I come from up north. I rode with the Circle S up in the Panhandle, but I had some trouble with the boss and

The bullet slapped through the crown of his hat.

A man needs a heap more than just everyday guts when, like Sheriff Wismer, he must be judge, jury and executioner of the killer for whom he'd gladly spill the last drop of his loyal, fighting blood. . . .

got laid off. I was just drifting and looking for another job when I spotted our friend here beside the road."

"You mentioned the Circle S," the sheriff said carefully. "What was your trouble there?"

"The boss had a daughter."

He loosened up and grinned a little. "Did she have a name?"

"Sure. Joyce Munson. The old man is Abe Munson."

He let go then and laughed one of the most satisfying laughs I ever heard. "I've known Abe for years," he said. "He's been firing riders over that daughter of his ever since I can remember."

THE sheriff and I were old friends then. Anyway, I dropped my hands without getting shot at. The sheriff picked up my hat, dusted it, and gave it to me.

"I'm sorry about the holes," he said. "But I didn't feel like taking chances. About two hours back a stage was robbed here." He indicated the dead man with a toe of a shiny boot. "This feller was killed in the fracas. Driver got a bullet in the leg. We figured maybe they'd come back. That's how come we was waitin' back there in the wash."

The man on the ground didn't look like a highwayman, so I decided he must have been a passenger. But that didn't tell me why the sheriff expected the bandits to return to the scene of the crime, as they say.

He answered that one by walking down the road a little way and picking up a canvas bag. It had CATTLEMAN'S BANK stenciled on it in black ink, the kind of bags that banks use to make their shipments in. "They dropped this one," the sheriff explained. "I guess the shotgun guard was makin' things pretty hot. Anyway, it doesn't look like they're comin' back for it, so we might as well get along."

The dead man turned out to be a whiskey drummer from Kansas City. The two deputies brought a buckboard out of the wash and loaded him in and headed south along the road. I wondered what else they were going to bring out of that wash. It wouldn't have surprised me to have seen a regiment of cavalry come charging out. But the sheriff's horse was all that was left. He got that and we rode directly south behind the buckboard.

"Is this the usual thing?" I said. "This stage robbery business?"

"Just about," the sheriff said off hand. "Third one this month."

"Anybody else hurt?"

"The bank mostly. They haven't got enough cash to pay the bookkeeper's salary."

I let it go at that. I wasn't interested now that I was out of it. Riding into town I learned that the sheriff's name was Wismer. I told him mine was Matt Reynolds and that ended the conversation.

The town turned out to be a place called Ciudad Rojo, which, from what I could figure out, meant Red City. Red City was four saloons, a barber shop and a small assortment of general stores flanking either side of the stage road. I guess it got its name from the red clay which was about all you could see in any direction you looked. Down at the far end of the street was the usual livery barn and stables, and at the near end was the sheriff's office where most of the townpeople seemed to be gathered.

For no reason, I got off my horse and followed the sheriff as he pushed his way through the crowd and into his office.

Somebody said, "Any sign of them, Sheriff?"

"Nope," Wismer answered pleasantly, "not a thing."

"It's high time somethin' was done," an angry voice cut in. "Are you goin' after them, Sheriff?"

"Be glad to," the sheriff said easily, "if I knew what direction to take."

THE main attraction inside the office seemed to be a grizzled old geezer with a face that looked like it had been twisted off a barrelhead cactus. A girl was finishing up a bandage job on his leg while he turned the air a pale blue with cuss words.

"Now, Ike," the sheriff said soothingly, "take it easy. How's the leg, Joan?"

The girl looked up then and I lost track of things. I don't know what it was about her. Take any one thing, like her hair, or her nose, or her eyes, it didn't come to much. But when you put them all together it added up to something a man wouldn't soon forget.

"It's just a flesh wound," Joan said. "He'll be all right in three or four weeks, Sheriff."

"Three or four weeks hell!" the old geezer howled. "I'm takin' that stage to Camden and I'm startin' now!"

I said, "You couldn't brake a stage with that leg."

The old boy glared."Who the hell asked you to butt in?"

He had a point there, but I got some attention from the girl, and that was what I wanted. She thanked me with a glance for trying to help. Then a worried-looking man came in and called the sheriff over. They gave something a good talking over, and I caught enough of it to know what their problem was.

I said, "If you need somebody to drive the stage, maybe I'll do. I'm looking for a job."

The worried man snapped at it like a shoat at feeding time. But the sheriff was grinning wide and I wasn't fooling him a bit. He said, "It couldn't be that you've taken a sudden likin' to Ciudad Rojo, could it?" Then he remembered his manners and introduced us.

The worried man's name was Ray Silver, but he wasn't so worried now that the prospect of keeping his stages running was looking up. He said quickly, "The job's yours. You ever driven before?"

I said, "Sure. An old Concord outfit up in Indian Territory."

I had never driven a stage, but I drove a sixteen-oxen freighter once and I figured anything after that would be easy.

I tried to think of a way to get to know the girl better, but Silver was in too much of a hurry to wait for anything like that. In less than an hour we had the passengers and baggage loaded and were ready to go south.

Sheriff Wismer came around to grin before I laid on the whip. "You'll get your fool self killed," he said. "There's bad road between here and Camden. You never really drove before, did you?"

I said, "No," because he was one of those people that it doesn't do any good to lie to.

"Well, it'll make a nice funeral," he said cheerfully. "Since you're goin' to all this trouble because a girl looked at you, I might as well tell you her name. It's Joan Summers. She keeps house for her uncle, old Ike Summers, the one that just got shot in the leg."

I said, "Thanks, Sheriff."

"Don't mention it."

Then I snapped my lines over the six horses and started earning my pay.

IT WAS a hard way to make a living, wrestling with six horses that couldn't make up their minds which direction to take. And rutted roads swirling around mountains, and sheer drops that took your breath away. The Silver Stage Company was a feeder line between Red City and Camden, with only two way-stations to connect them. By the time we reached the first I was ready to quit. My shoulders ached from using muscles that had never been worked before. My back and legs felt like things that I didn't even own any more.

But I was back in the box when time came to pull out again. I was beginning to wish that I had used my head and figured out an easier way to get to know Joan Summers, but it was too late for that now. Then I didn't have time to think about anything. It was a fight to the finish, me against six hell-bound horses.

There was a rest in Camden while another driver took the stage back, but not enough to do much good. When I checked in at Red City again the one man I didn't want to see was waiting for me, chuckling.

"I didn't think you'd make it," the sheriff said.

I didn't say anything. I climbed down from the box and went around to the back of the stage office to wash the road off my face. While I had my head under the pump the sheriff said, "You're not very smart, Reynolds. You do all this because of a girl and you don't even ask if she's married."

My head came out of the water fast. "Is she?"

"No-o," he said. "Not quite, that is."

"What does that mean?"

"The story has it she's engaged to Ray Silver. Of course that doesn't mean it's too late. A younger man with plenty of money and good position might still have

a chance. How you fixed in that direction?"

A hell of a sheriff he was. One man had been killed, another shot, a bank was being robbed blind, and all he could do was gossip. I wiped my face on my shirt-tail and he stood there grinning.

"I bet this town wouldn't know how to get along without you," I said.

Suddenly he went serious on me. "I've been sheriff for fourteen years," he said. "We never had any real trouble until lately. Oh, there's been some rustlin', and maybe a killin' now and then, but nothin' that ever threatened to bankrupt the whole county before."

"Maybe somebody wants to see it bankrupt," I said.

"....Maybe." He shrugged.

"You got any ideas?"

"A few, but they don't come to much."

I got my hat, the one with his bullet holes in it, and put it on. "Well, Sheriff, you think about it. The Indians might have the run of the country in another hundred years and it won't make any difference." I was tired. Every muscle complained in a loud voice. The quicker I put them to bed, the better.

"I made a date for you while you was away," the sheriff said. "I didn't think you'd mind. Old Ike Summers has got it in his mind to ride shotgun tomorrow on another pay load. I mentioned to Joan that maybe you could come over and talk him out of it."

SUDDENLY I saw the sheriff as a different man. This time as one of those kindly old boys you hear about but never see. The sort that goes around making matches with the young folks, handing out sage advice to the older ones, and saving homesteads in the nick of time. Before long that illusion went away, but I still wondered how many sides there were to Sheriff Wismer of Red City.

Anyway, the thought of Joan Summers quieted my aches and pains. I said, "Sheriff, that's real nice of you."

He grinned. "Wasn't nothin'." He turned and sauntered off toward the livery barn, then as an after-thought he added, "Joan said to tell you supper's at six-thirty. She'll be expectin' you."

At six-thirty I had on my clean shirt and was pushing the gate open to the Summers place. It was a small house with a fence around it and a lot of honeysuckle at one end of the front porch weighting down the early evening air with its sweetness. I almost ran into Ray Silver as he was coming out. He was still looking worried, but I had an idea that it was about Joan's having strange men to supper, this time, and not the stage line.

He said, "Oh, Reynolds, it's you."

I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. Silver. I just brought the coach in about an hour ago."

"Did you make the trip all right?"

"Fine," I said, and that seemed to end the conversation. He was a thin, quiet-eyed man, and his hair was beginning to frost a little around the temples. I liked the direct way he had of looking at you, and I wondered if at last I hadn't found an honest man. He nodded pleasantly, went out the gate and toward town.

The evening was everything a man could ask for and not be a pig. The supper was the kind you think your mother used to cook. Even old Ike Summers had seemed to take a liking to me, and things went along fine until I mentioned that he shouldn't make the run with that leg of his. Then he chased us both outside with his cussing.

For a while we just looked at the big silver dollar of a moon that was beginning to lurch up from its hiding place behind Red City's barber shop. Joan Summers didn't say much. I wanted to find out some more about her and Ray Silver, but I was afraid that would be rushing things.

Finally she said, "It looks like my idea wasn't much good. Uncle Ike is bound to make that run. I'm sorry I put you to this trouble."

I said, "I like trouble like this."

She smiled a little, but I couldn't tell if it meant anything. She said, "I'm worried. There's another pay load tomorrow and there's bound to be trouble."

"If it'll make you feel any better," I said, "I'll make the run with him."

She smiled her thanks and I got the idea that that was the real reason she had invited me here. Up until now my one-track mind had been concentrating on Joan Summers and not much of anything else. But now I began to get curious about other things.

I said, "How many people know about the pay load?"

"Just the bank officials, and the stage company, and the sheriff."

I said, "How about Ray Silver?"

She gave me a funny look and I felt like I had just stabbed the hand that was feeding me. "Mr. Silver just about built Red City," she said. "When this country was first discovered as good grazing land he loaned the cattlemen money to get started on. And he kept it up until a company in Camden put in a regular bank."

I let it go at that. About nine o'clock we said good night, but for a long time after I got back to the hotel I felt lightheaded from being close to her.

OLD Ike Summers made the run with me the next morning, cussing at every jump and lambasting me for being the worst stage driver this side of St. Louis. But we made it into Camden, and the next morning we loaded up for the trouble run back.

For passengers we had a saloon girl and a circuit-riding preacher whose horse had gone lame on him. A combination like that was bad enough, but it was the eight thousand dollars that we had tucked away under the driver's board that had me worried.

At the first rest station Ike said, "You know how to use that gun on your hip?"

"I was brought up with it," I said, "but I never used it to earn a living with."

That seemed to satisfy him. As we pulled out I said, "You got any idea who's behind these holdups?"

"Somebody have to be behind 'em?" he said. "The country's full of badmen hankering to get ahead in a hurry." Summers broke his shotgun, checked it and got ready. "The pass just on this side of the flats is the place we gotta watch," he shouted. "One coach has been stopped there already."

I nodded and laid on the leather. By the time we saw the pass we were rolling good. A minute later we hit it like a bull going through a paper fence. We made it and started up a grade and I started to breathe again. I eased the horses down and shouted, "It looks like the bank's going to get some working capital after all." But I spoke too soon.

They were waiting for us at the top of the rise, with brush thrown across the road to block us. I jerked the horses over to head across country, but I could see that we weren't going to do any good at that. There were four riders gaining on us at every jump.

Ike Summers yelled, "Lay it on! We'll make a runnin' fight out of it!" and his shotgun bellowed.

Then I had the old man in my lap. He flopped over on me like a big rag doll with the sawdust leaking out. But this time the sawdust was a bright red. It came out of a hole in his shirt and smeared the driver's seat. I knew it was over then. Eight thousand dollars or no eight thousand dollars, bank or no bank, it was over. I braked hard and jerked on the lines until the horses stopped. Then I picked the old man up.

He was already dead. His eyes were staring wide, as if he had just got his first glimpse of eternity and was horribly frightened by what he saw. I closed my eyes and placed him as gently as I could

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on the floorboards at my feet. By that time we had company.

"The money box," one of the riders said. "Throw it off." They had their neckerchiefs pulled up and their hats tugged down. All I could see was four pairs of eyes. And four guns. One of the men yanked the saloon girl and the preacher out of the coach and shook them down.

The rider who had spoken was beginning to get impatient. "Do you throw it off, or do we have to get it another way?"

I didn't think I would forget that voice. But I kicked the money off. It didn't mean anything to me now. All I could think about was Joan Summers, and what I was going to say to her when I brought back her dead uncle.

The talkative gunman made a satisfied sound as the box hit the ground. He got down, shot the lock off and split the bills four ways. That was a nice touch, splitting the money on the spot. Then they fogged it in four different directions, making four trails to follow instead of one.

"You're a fine one!" the saloon girl said brassily. "Lettin' that scum push ladies around like that."

Then she saw old Ike there on the floorboards and shut up. The preacher hadn't said a word, and he didn't start now. They got back in and I started the coach to rolling. That was a long trip to Red City.

CHAPTER TWO

The Pilgrim Star-Toter

RAY SILVER called me into his office shortly after we got in. His face was serious and tired and looked awfully old. There were six long, determined-faced men sitting around the table staring at me. I found out later that they were all the owners of the stage line, but I didn't know that then. At last Silver said very softly, "Reynolds, I'm deeply grieved by what has just happened. We all are."

I said, "Yeah." That seemed to be the only word in me.

Then Silver got up heavily from his desk and looked at me in that straight way of his. He said finally, "Reynolds, the owners of the Silver Stage Company called this meeting right after they heard what had happened. I hope you can see our side of it. That robbery means that a bank has gone broke. It also means that all the ranchers near Red City are broke, because they all had their money in that bank."

"To say nothing of a fine old man getting killed," I said.

Silver's face paled for an instant, then he went on. "The owners have decided that it would be better if you didn't drive any more."

He could have padded it up some and made it sound better. But he didn't. Well, that was that. I didn't hate Silver or the other owners, but a friend of mine had just been killed and I didn't give a damn if it stormed or not. I leaned forward on the desk and said a lot of things that I knew I was going to be sorry for later, but I had to get it off my chest. Then I went to the front office, collected my pay and left the place. I was starting to steam a little.

I did a job then that I had put off as long as I could. I went to see Joan Summers. I don't know what I had expected —the usual thing, I guess, a lot of tears. But her face was a hard mask. If she had cried, it had been on the inside. Her eyes were dry, and that's the way it hurts the most.

Nobody had a right to hurt another person that way. That was when I made up my mind to take all the chips I could buy. It was a big game and I was dealing myself in. . . .

The sheriff listened to my proposition when he and a posse got back from chasing their tails. "We didn't do any good," he said wearily. "We'll never do any good until we find out how they work. The men who held up the stage could be anybody. There are plenty of self-styled badmen that would listen to a good proposition. The thing is to find the man that passes out the information on the pay loads."

"You mentioned once that you had some ideas on that," I said. "Let's hear about them."

"Ideas are like snakes. They're all right as long as you let them alone. When you start prodding them somebody's going to get hurt."

"Somebody's been hurt," I said. "I've been in town three days and two men have died and a bank has gone broke."

He nodded like a tired old man. At last he said, "I hear you lost your drivin' job."

"That's right."

"Do you want another one?"

"I was going to get around to asking."

"All right. Raise your hand and I'll swear you in as deputy."

THE next day they had the funeral down by the small frame church at the end of the street. The circuit-riding preacher said his speech, and they shoveled dirt on top of Ike Summers and that was all there was to it. I watched Joan with a hollow feeling inside me. Her face was beginning to break up, and before long I knew it would go all to pieces. But not before she was alone. She came up to me after it was over.

"I want you to know that I don't blame you for anything," she said. "I was afraid that you'd think I would."

I mumbled something and finally said, "If there's anything I can do...."

Then she saw the badge pinned to my vest, and from the look in her eyes I knew I had done the right thing. I watched her as long as there was anything to watch. Ray Silver came up then in a rig and asked if he could take her home. She got in, not seeming to care one way or the other about anything.

I waited a couple of days and kept my eyes open and hoped that I might see something. There wasn't any particular hurry now. All the killing seemed to be over, with no more pay loads being hauled. About the only thing I noticed was that Joan Summers wasn't seeing much of Silver. The way she felt, she wasn't having much to do with anybody, I guess. The ranchers were pretty long-faced about their troubles but they didn't blame anybody in particular, except the holdup men.

That was all I learned that week. Except how it felt to butt heads with a .45.

The four men rode into town sometime after sundown. They were in the saloon that night when I walked in. They looked like ordinary punchers that had come into town to raise a little hell before going back to their job of nursing cows for another four months. Except that they paid a lot of attention to their guns. The butts of their .45s had a comfortable look, like the handle of a woodsman's axe, as if they had been worn that way by a lot of use. They put their backs to the bar as I came in and watched me.

They let me get a good look, then they paid up and went out. It wasn't until I was half way through my second beer that it hit me, and I wondered what I'd been using for brains. I paid for the beer and went out of there quick, almost bowling the sheriff over as he came through the batwings.

He said, "What's the hurry, son? You look all worked up about something."

"I am. I'll tell you about it later."

"I'd better go with you."

"It's nothing I can't take care of."

Ordinarily I'm no hand at playing the hero, but if those four men were who I thought they were, I had a score that had to be settled just between me and them. The sheriff shrugged and I headed toward the livery barn, hoping that they hadn't left their horses on the street.

I almost made it. But not quite. From an alleyway between a saddle shop and a general store a voice said, "That's far enough, mister."

I hadn't thought I would forget that voice. And I hadn't. The last time I heard it it had been telling me to throw the bank money off the stage.

IT WASN'T dark there in the alley. The saddlemaker was filling a rush order and had a lantern burning near the window on that side of the building. But the gunmen didn't care. They were going to kill me, get on their horses and ride off into the darkness, and they didn't care about a saddlemaker.

The talkative gunman was grinning. The others didn't do much of anything, except one of them took my gun and tossed it against the building.

Gabby said, "You move around a lot, don't you, mister? From stage driver to deputy," and then he laughed, "to Boothill."

There's no explaining men like Gabby. Some people just like to kill. They like to drag it out and savor it as long as they can. Besides being the only talker,

Gabby was the boss of the other three, I guessed. Anyway, he was the chief executioner, as he was the only one that had his gun drawn.

I began to get sick. My stomach curled up like a bear in the snow and growled. Gabby wanted to see me squirm before he pulled that trigger. He was that kind.

I said, "You can't get away with it, Gabby. You can kill me maybe, but you'll never get out of Red City."

He merely grinned. He had heard the speech before. "Don't get the idea that it's anything personal, mister," he said. "It's not that at all. It's just a job that has to be done."

I talked fast because I could see that trigger finger tightening. "To have a job you have to have a boss. It wouldn't be that the boss wants me out of the way, would it?"

He only laughed. He was through talking and ready to start shooting. I wondered if I could knock his legs from under him and maybe scramble things up until I could find a gun somewhere. I knew I couldn't, but I was about to try anyway when a shot ripped the night wide open.

Gabby's gun flew straight up, as if it had been jerked on a string. Somewhere in the back of my mind I heard the sheriff's voice shouting for them not to move. They didn't seem to hear. One of Gabby's side men lunged for his gun, stuck the muzzle in my face and let it go off. I lost interest in things after that.

CHAPTER THREE

Brand of the Brother Cain

THE sheriff brought me out of it once for a few seconds, slapping my face and shouting in my ear. "Reynolds, snap out of it, you're not hurt!"

Maybe not, but Red City was going to be a lot redder when I got through bleeding on it. Then I heard the sheriff yelling, "Here, some of you give me a hand. We've got to get him where somebody can take care of him. The rest of you get your horses."

I went back to sleep.

* * *

I slept for a long time, and finally I started to dream. I dreamed that Joan Sumners came into the room where I was and stood there by the bed.

She said, "Good morning. How's your head?"

Then I knew that it wasn't a dream. I sat up in bed and wondered who had taken off my shirt and pants. I never did find out.

"Fine," I said. "Somebody just misplaced an axe. Walked off and left it in my skull."

It was worth getting my head cracked just to hear her laugh. I could tell it was the first time she had made that kind of sound for a long time. She said, "I know it must be painful, but it really isn't a bad wound. The bullet just grazed your scalp. You'll have to part your hair on the right side from now on."

I heard a horse stop outside. There were boots on the porch and Joan went into the other room.

The sheriff came in by himself. His eyes were tired and his face was gray for want of sleep. "You all right?" he said briefly.

"As soon as I get my shirt and pants back on," I said. "Thanks for the hand last night. Do you ever miss with that carbine?"

He went to a closet, got my shirt and pants and threw them on the bed. As I pulled them on he dropped into a chair and sat there staring woodenly at the floor. He pulled a gun out of his waistband and tossed it at me. It was mine.

By that time I had figured out that we were in Ike Summers' house. Joan's now. I didn't waste time asking how I got there.

I said, "Can you bring me up to date? I lost track of things after that bushwhacking."

"I knew you was hell-bent for some kind of trouble when I saw you leave the saloon last night." He talked in a tired, sing-song voice, as if he were reading from a book. "I followed you on the other side of the street. When I figured out what was goin' on I put in a warning shot to stop it. But it didn't work. I had to kill one of them." Then he looked up. "Who were they?"

"The men who held up the stage and killed Ike Summers."

He nodded, and then said, "It don't make much sense, does it?"

I went over to the dresser mirror and had a look at myself. About three petticoats had been torn into strips and wrapped around my head. I said, "I think it's just beginning to make sense." I went back to the bed and waited for the hammering in my skull to stop.

"In the first place, those gunmen wouldn't have shown up in town if they'd had anything to say about it. That means they've got a boss. And the boss is here in Red City. The gunmen didn't have any reason to kill me, but the boss did, whoever he is, and he hired them to do the job just like he hired them to rob the stage coaches."

The sheriff didn't say a thing. He just sat there in the chair and got older and more weary looking.

I said, "Sheriff, do you really want to get the man behind it?"

He didn't make a move.

"I only know of one man that has any reason to get rid of me," I went on. "He might want me out because he thinks I'm giving him competition with his girl, or he might be afraid I'd recognize the hold-up men and get some information from them."

He knew who I was talking about. At last he said, "Ray Silver?"

"Can you think of anybody else?"

"You're crazy," he said. But he couldn't think of anybody else. But finally he said, "I've been sheriff here in Red City for a long time and I've tried to be a good one. If Silver's the one, we'll get him."

"When?" I said.

"After I get some sleep."

I WASN'T sick enough to stay in the Summers house any longer. I left right after the sheriff did, and I hoped that it wouldn't be long before it was over and we could all be people again. Maybe then Joan Summers would see me as a man who was in love with her, and not as just a gun out to avenge her uncle.

I waited in the sheriff's office until he came down that afternoon. Sleep hadn't helped him much. He still looked about twenty years older than he had the day before.

He said, "Last night we trailed the gunmen across Mud River, but we lost them on the high ground on the other side. More than likely they're holed up in the badlands to the west, but there wouldn't be much chance of finding them without some help."

"And who do you figure can help us?" I said.

"Their boss. If he's in Red City."

He had a simple plan that might work if we got some luck. First, he called one of his deputies and told him to drop the word around that we had the killers' hide-out pinned down, and tonight a posse was going after them. Their boss couldn't afford to let a posse get hold of them. A talkative man like Gabby might say the wrong thing. All we had to do was station ourselves out and wait for their boss to make a bee-line to the hide-out to warn them.

It sounded all right. I didn't have anything better worked out. We gave the deputy about half an hour to get the rumor rolling good, then we slipped our horses out the back way and hoped that nobody noticed us leaving town.

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We waited down by a little creek to the west of town, with our horses pulled under some willows where we could see the trail. I hadn't finished smoking my first cigarette when a rider came fogging it over the rise. Without a word, we wheeled our horses out and pointed them toward Mud River.

We didn't have to keep him in sight. He was leaving a trail behind him that a blind Easterner could have followed. The mud was still stirred up in the river when we got there, and the sun was about gone. Pretty soon we put some iron to our horses and moved up a notch or two until we raised him heading for the high ground of the badlands.

We stuck to him from then on. The country was rough up there, the kind of country that a bounty-hunter could make himself a fortune in. If he lived long enough.

The rider slowed his pace suddenly, and made hoot-owl calls toward a rocky little valley below him. I saw to the hang of my gun then, because I didn't think it would be long before I might need it.

Sure enough, he got an answering call from below and he began to slip away in the darkness. The rider was Silver, all right.

I said, "Sheriff, do you still have any doubts about Silver?"

I was feeling pretty proud of myself and I guess I had to rub it in. Then a dirty cloud floated away from the moon and I saw Wismer's face in the milky light. It was drawn and very tired. And somehow I felt sorry for him, without knowing why.

WE GOT OFF our horses and tried not to start a landslide as we made our way down into the valley. After we got down we saw the cabin, a small log affair with gunny sacking tacked over the windows, almost shutting out the orange lamplight inside. When we got close enough we could hear the voices.

Gabby was getting in a word now and then, but it was Ray Silver who was holding the floor. It took about thirty seconds of listening to prove that my guesses had been right. It was the sheriff's move then.

He nodded at the door and we got up and moved toward it like cats with sore paws. The sheriff didn't handle it the way I would have. He banged on the door with the barrel of his carbine and said, "Come out, Ray. You and the others, with your hands up."

The talking stopped. They could all have had their throats cut for all the noise they made after that. The sheriff knocked again and I stepped back. That door didn't look like it would do much good if somebody inside caught a sudden case of trigger fever.

"It's no good, Ray," the sheriff said tiredly. "If you come out I'll see that you get a fair trial."

He left the rest unsaid, but the men inside didn't have any trouble piecing it together. They were cold meat. There was only one door to the place and sooner or later they would have to come out of it. Then the door opened and Ray Silver stood framed in the light, looking down the barrel of the sheriff's carbine. He smiled the faintest smile in the world and said, "So it's finally come to this, hasn't it, Sam?"

He backed back into the cabin with his hands up, and the sheriff followed. I went in next, with my .45 out. I saw two of the gunmen standing over beside the wall with their hands up. I wondered where the third one was. I looked for him—but I didn't look behind the door as I stepped in, and that was a mistake. Something came down on my sore head like a mountain falling.

I went down but not out. I could thank the heavy bandages on my head for that. But I wasn't thanking anybody for anything as I lay there with my brain shriveled in one corner of my skull trying to get away from the sharp knives of pain. I heard the shooting as if it were happening in another world.

When I got my eyes open I saw that I had company on the floor. Gabby and his two pards were sprawled in those ridiculous, uncomfortable positions that always mean the same thing. I guessed that they had made the mistake of thinking that they could outshoot that carbine of Sheriff Wismer's. I could have told them better—if they had asked me.

I expected to see Ray Silver sprawled around somewhere too. But I didn't. He and the sheriff were standing in the

middle of the room, the sheriff staring into the muzzle of Silver's .45, and Silver, still smiling slightly, contemplating the sheriff's carbine. I wondered how Silver had lived long enough to get that .45 out of his shoulder holster. He must be a lot faster than I had thought. Anyway, they had worked themselves into a stand-off now. It was just a matter of who would pull the trigger first.

Neither of them seemed to be in any hurry. I guess they both counted me out of the game a long time ago. Silver said, "I'm sorry it worked out this way, Sam. But that's the way it goes sometimes."

The sheriff said, "Drop the gun, Ray. We're goin' to town."

SILVER'S smile widened just a little. Suddenly he flipped the .45 over and shoved it back in his shoulder holster. "I'm not going to town," he said. "I wouldn't look good in a hanging rope. I'm going to walk outside, get on my horse and ride for the border. And you won't do anything to stop me, Sam."

It was crazy. I wondered if maybe I'd got hit on the head too often.

Silver said, "I'll be seeing you, Sam." He brushed some dust from the lapel of his coat and started for the door.

"Stop it, Ray," the sheriff said tightly. "So help me, I'll fire."

Silver didn't seem to hear. He walked easily to the door, stepped outside and seemed to admire the night for a few seconds. The sheriff's face was a thousand years old and set as hard as granite. He gripped the stock of that carbine until I expected it to splinter. "Don't do it, Ray," he said. He was begging now, and it came hard. The sheriff wasn't a begging man.

I discovered that I could move my arm. I dragged it down to my holster and hauled my gun up into working position. I don't know why I bothered. The sheriff would stop Silver. Even if he had to shoot him in the back. But somehow I knew it was important that I do it. Then I heard my voice croaking, "That's far enough, Silver!"

That did it. He whipped around, and somehow in the motion he got his gun in his hand. I knew now how fast he really was. His first shot ripped up some planking about a foot from my head. I took careful aim. One shot was all I was going to get and it had better be good.

I got him somewhere between the point of his shoulder and the center of his back. He spun like a top, flapping his arms crazily, trying to regain his balance. He never made it. He hit the ground with his face.

I lay there on the floor and panted The sheriff started making strange little noises, half mumbling, half crying. And that was when I found out that Ray Silver was his brother.

* * *

I got the rest of the story as we cut some willow trunks for a travois and hauled Silver back to town. The bullet in the shoulder wasn't going to kill him.

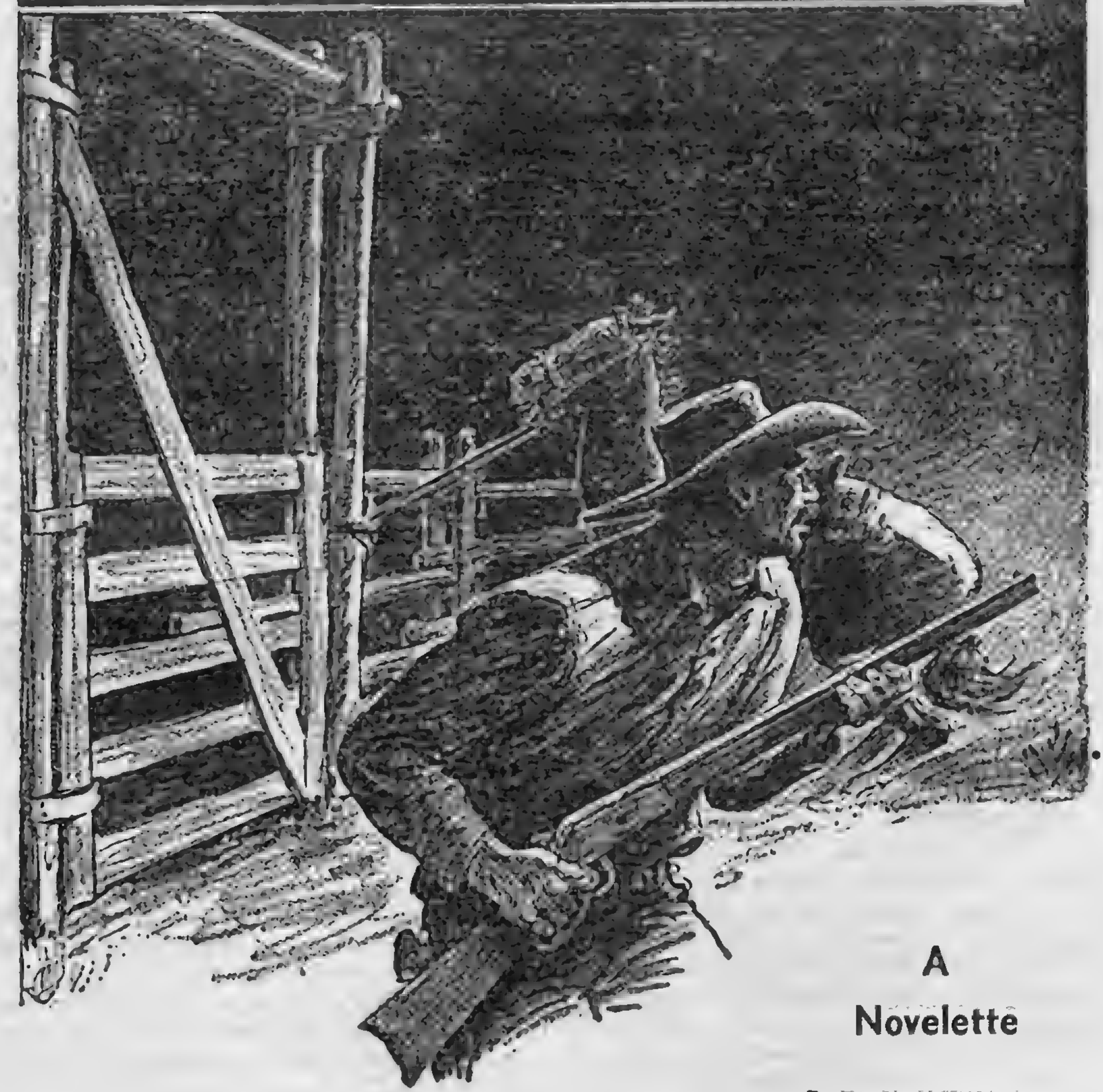
I guess Ray Silver, or Ray Wismer, had been the wild one in the family. He ran away when he was just a kid, and it was several years later that he showed up in Red City where Sam Wismer was sheriff. He had changed his name, and I couldn't blame the sheriff for believing that he had changed his ways. It looked like he was helping the ranchers all along —until the showdown came. Actually he was loaning the ranchers money, all right, but all the time he was planning to get it back with plenty to spare. The way he figured it, they would have to borrow money from him after the bank was broke, and it wouldn't be long before he could start foreclosing and take over the places that other men had started to build. And that was the reason he had been robbing his own stages—so he could put the bank out of business.

I still don't know if the sheriff would have stopped him that night. I'm glad that it wasn't put to a test. Anyway, it was over. The people in Red City could begin to live like people, and not have their legs cut from under them every time they tried to stand up.

And me—I had a lot of catching up to do. I wanted to get from behind my badge and convince a girl that I was more than just a change of dirty clothes and a gun. That would take time too. But somehow I had the feeling I could do it.

THE END

NINE COFFINS FOR ROCKING H



A

Novelette

By

JOHN D. MacDONALD

A grave, first for the plough-pushing farmer leader, then seven more for his aged, rag-tag raiders. . . . Yes, the bloody Rocking H was ruthless with hoemen, until it uncorked a trick that demanded vengeance even from the toughest gunmen in hell—the killing of a fourteen-year-old button!

He fired twice as he raced in.

CHAPTER ONE

Six Ride Back From Hell

THEY came through the pass at night, more than a dozen of them, with no sound but the muffled *clop* of hoofs, creak of leather, chinking of metal, the soft blowing of the horses.

The low-sailing moon slid from behind a cloud and Anse Forrester, in the lead, made a hissing sound and held up his arm. One horse started to whinny, getting out one small sound before finger and thumb clamped its nostrils.

In the tinsel of the moonlight Nick Lees looked around at the vague forms of his companions and smiled wryly in the night. Here were farm plugs, aged rifles, men

with shoulders bowed and hands horny from toil in the fields.

"Dismount!" Forrester said, the moon picking up the white of his hair. His voice held the biblical timbre of command. As the moon faded behind another cloud, Anse said dryly, "And you, Lees, may care to stay here with the horses."

Lees said, his anger under control, "It's not that I'm afraid of them, Forrester. I told you before that Haggar has ten hands plus the six he brought in here. Any one of them can outride you, outshoot you. But I'll go along."

"They have killed," Forrester said, his voice low, rolling, full of power. "They have killed and burned and destroyed. Haggar is a Godless man. The hand of the righteous is strong. I will take the vengeance of the Lord."

"I told you fifty times, Forrester, that the way to handle this is to get your evidence on Haggar and turn it over to the U. S. marshal. There's laws to protect legitimate homesteaders."

"Who will be left by the time we get the evidence?" a voice said out of the darkness. "There's been enough talk. Your spread happened to be so small it looked like a homestead to Haggar, so he burned you out. Either shut up or go your way, Lees."

Nick said softly, "He burned me out because he liked my springs. You people can't buck Haggar with squirrel guns and fool courage. But if you're determined to go down there, I'll come along to keep you out of as much trouble as I can." He turned and looked down the slope to where the tiny lights of the main spread of the Rocking H flickered against the velvet panel of the night.

"Hold the horses here, Randolph," Forrester said.

A young voice, so young that it threatened to break back into treble said, "Oh, Grandad! I want to—"

"Do as you're told!"

Nick Lees shrugged in the darkness, slipped the carbine out of the boot, held it in his left hand and followed Anse along the gentler slope down to the natural bowl in which sat Rocking H.

As the lights grew closer, Nick said, "Cut off to the right and come in toward the house, Forrester. Otherwise you'll be hitting plumb on the bunkhouse side."

Forrester grunted and angled off toward the right. Nick glanced back, barely able to see by the starlight that all the men were close and bunched. A hundred yards from the house Nick stopped Anse and whispered, "He may have a guard or two strolling around. I say get down and wiggle in the rest of the way."

"Pass the word," Forrester whispered as he dropped to his hands and knees.

The grass was dry and the rustling sound was too loud. Forrester was heading for a lighted window. Gradually a silhouette took shape in the window.

Sixty feet away Forrester stopped. He propped himself up on his elbows. Nick heard the dry *snick* of the bolt. He wiggled closer to Forrester. "What are you figuring on doing?"

Forrester whispered, "That's his head. He's beyond the window. I can tell by the outline. I'm going to kill him." He took a deep breath, audible to Nick, let it out slowly.

Nick said, "I thought you wanted to talk to him, to threaten him and talk sense to him."

"Stop bothering me, Lees. With that man dead the country will be at peace."

"I don't like it. He's too still. It looks like a trap. Even if you kill him, the shot'll bring every rannie here out on the run with a gun in his hand."

Forrester said in a voice as low and bitter as the splintering of rock under a shod hoof, "My son died in a fire that man set."

Nick Lees murmured, "I didn't sign up to drygulch anybody."

The old man aimed carefully. The bark of the rifle split the night, and glass tinkled distantly. Instantly the long line of the roof over the window erupted into darting orange lances of flame, into the echoing crash of guns, the whine and thud of bullets that struck around them.

Behind Nick, a man screamed. Nick had seen Haggar's cardboard sillhouette spin and topple as the slug tore its paper head. He realized that Haggar had known their every move.

SOMETHING plucked at his shoulder like the careless finger of a child as he rolled over and over, away from the most

dangerous place, the area where the enemy had seen the flash of Forrester's rifle.

Stretched flat, he aimed at the muzzle flashes along the line of the flat roof. Above the gunfire he heard the thick grunt, saw movement, heard a man fall to the packed ground near the wall.

From the side of the house a ball of flame sprung into light, arched out toward them. Nick cursed. An old trick: rags tied around a stone and soaked in kerosene. He snapped one shot too late at the figure who ducked around the house corner.

The men on the roof were still in shadow, but now they could see their targets. Nick saw Forrester stand slowly up to his full height, aim carefully at the roof. He fired. In the flare Nick saw puffs of dust spring from Forrester's clothes where the bullets hit. The rifle sagged. The man sank to his knees as though in prayer, then sagged over onto his side.

Three men charged around the corner of the house, firing as they came. Nick fired carefully, without haste. He dropped the leading man, caught the second as he stumbled over the first. The third darted back to cover.

Nick backed on hands and knees until he was out of the flare light. Then, disguising his voice, he yelled, "Let's get out of here!" Running clumsily in his heeled boots, he moved on a direct line for the pass silhouetted against the sky a half mile away.

He knew what would come next. When he was half way there he heard the thud of many hoofs and knew Haggar's men were riding to cut them off. Then the sound of more hoofs came from the direction of the pass. He snapped a shot, heard a voice say, "It's me! Johnny Forrester."

"Good boy!" Nick yelled.

He turned, emptied his revolver in the direction of Haggar's horsemen, heard them swing away. Nick looked down the slope, saw no one coming. The hands from the ranch had circled toward the pass. No good trying that direction.

He said quickly, "We're trapped here. Follow me. We'll ride down, cut to the right and hit the road at the main gate. I'll go far enough ahead to get the gate open."

Five men and a boy mounted. Eight empty saddles. But horses were too valuable to be turned loose. They held the lead reins and raced down for the gate.

Nick saw the startled gate guard turn toward him, saw the rifle barrel catch the moonlight glint. Nick had loaded the revolver as he galloped. He fired twice as he raced in. The horse shied violently as it stepped on the man on the ground. Nick snatched the bar back, swung the gate wide and remounted. He danced the horse over to the side, fired two shots at the ranchhouse itself as the horses pounded out onto the road. Then he wheeled, sped after them. They kept the farm horses in an awkward thundering run until they were winded. Then Nick ordered them to cut to a walk. The dusty road was silver-gold in the moonlight.

"Who are you?" Nick said softly.

The names came. "Delahanty." "Carden." "Mosher." "Layden."

Eight men dead or wounded. Nick said, "That was smart, Johnny, to bring the horses down, or they'd have trapped the rest of us."

The boy didn't answer. Nick could hear his dry and bitter sobbing.

Mosher said, "You were right, Lees. They trapped us. We were crazy to listen to the old man. Him and his big talk about—"

"Shut up!" Nick almost shouted. His voice was harsh. "That's over and done now. Don't cry over it. There'll be enough to cry over tomorrow. We'll go to the schoolhouse now. No need to scare the women tonight any more than they're already scared. Haggar won't kill the wounded. He'll have them treated. In the morning one of us can ride over there and find out who's still alive. Then you four can ride out to the homesteads and tell the families of the ones who got it. And that'll be a tough chore!"

They rode in silence to the bend from where they could see the schoolhouse. A light flickered in the window. Nick went ahead alone, circled the building on foot, crept cautiously to the window, looked inside and saw the slim girl sitting in the lamplight.

He turned and shouted, "It's all right. Come on in."

Delahanty and Layden took the horses around to the shed. The girl, Johnny Forrester's older sister, had heard the sounds and opened the door. She stood, taut, framed in the lighted doorway.

Johnny went up to her and said, "Sal, it . . . it all went wrong . . . Grandad's . . . ." Then with a small sound of despair he put his arms around her and began to sob.

She turned so that the light struck her face. "I knew something like this would happen," she said. "I waited here. Is what he says true, Mr. Lees?" Her face was cool, proud and composed.

"I'm afraid your grandfather's dead, Miss Forrester. Seven others are dead or wounded. We don't know which."

She said coolly, "I'm sure we have you to thank for this disaster, Mr. Lees. We are not a violent people. This night attack was not our way of doing things. I'm not quite sure which side you may be on, Mr. Lees. As we have nothing more to lose, I'm sure we don't interest you further. I'll bid you good night."

"But look, miss, I was only—"

"Good night, Mr. Lees. We'll take care of the rest of the necessary details."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Johnny and I will leave as soon as the burial is over."

She turned on her heel. Nick Lees walked slowly back to the shed, found Layden just loosening the cinches on his pony. He brushed the man aside, yanked them tight again, mounted and rode off into the night.

AN HOUR later he was "home." He realized it was optimistic thinking to consider it his own land. He spread his bedroll on pine needles, lay back, his hands clasped behind his head, a cigarette between his lips.

He had never had great sympathy for homesteaders. Nor had he disliked them particularly. He had his own boundaries and wasn't planning to expand. But with Haggar and his Rocking H eating up the country in great gulps, he suddenly found himself as part of a persecuted minority. He knew it the night he had seen the flames of his small house pinking the sky. Haggar's plan was to chase them off, set up one of his own men to prove out the homestead, then buy it cheap. On homesteads already proven, he had persuaded many families to sell and move on.

There was a faint sound of footsteps. He sat up quickly, gun barrel moving in slow arcs in the direction of the sound.

"Me, boss," Bob Furnell said easily. "Spotted the cigarette. How'd it go?"

"A mess. Old Forrester tired to bushwhack Haggar. Lost his head, I guess. It was a trap. Men on the roof. Fourteen rode in and six rode out. Looks like it might be the end of it for them and for us too."

"I thought there was a law in this here country," Furnell said. He was a squat, quick-moving, easy-going hand of forty who had drifted in when Nick was first starting. He hadn't volunteered any information and Nick hadn't asked for any. The spread was so small that the two of them could work the herd most of the year, with one extra hand for round-up.

Nick smiled mirthlessly. "Law? Haggar's law. Burn 'em out! Scare 'em out! Somehow I got on his list."

Furnell eased himself down. He rolled a smoke, lit it. "Just come back from the

north spring, the one at the edge of the rocks. We got fifteen dead head there. Something in the water. I was on my way after a roll of mesh wire to stake over the pool."

Nick sat up quickly. "Poison?" he asked slowly.

"Their tongues was out and black as Haggar's dirty heart. What do you think?"

Nick was silent for a time. He said, "I'll leave it up to you, Bob. Here I am thirty-one next month. I haven't got the money to go to law and I haven't got the guns to fight 'em off. Tonight maybe I killed two or three people. Haven't shot at anybody since I was twenty, and then I only drilled the fella in the leg. I can cash in a little on the beef, sell off the saddle stock and find me a new place and start all over. Or I can stay here until I'm so broke I have to go to work for somebody."

"You want me to tell you what to do?"

"I could use a hint."

Bob Furnell ground his cigarette into the dirt. He said, "Ain't you mad?"

"Just—well, discouraged. No, not mad, I guess."

"Then you better fold up and ride on out. Takes a mad man to scare off the wolves. I'll get that mesh." He stood up.

"Wait a minute. You talk as though you knew, Bob." It was the closest Nick had ever come to asking Furnell a direct question.

"Had a place four times the size of this sixteen years ago. Few other people wanted it. They didn't get it."

"Why haven't you still got it, then?"

"It dried up and the bank got it, Nick."

Furnell drifted off. After a time Nick sighed, saddled up and rode off toward the spring. Bob would need a hand covering it up. In the moonlight the cattle carcasses were like mounds of dirt.

He tried to feel anger, could feel nothing but the helpless resignation of a fair and honest man confronted with top-heavy odds and complete ruthlessness. He had worked hard, had saved money as a top-hand, had carefully picked his spread.

Now nothing on earth could keep him from losing it. He sat his horse, half dozing. The water in the pool had an evil glitter.

CHAPTER TWO

Fugitive!

AT NINE in the morning he rode along the main street of Garnet, picked the Garnet House Saloon as the best place to learn the news, tied his reins around the bar and went inside, blinking to adjust his eyes to the dimness after the sunglare outside. Ten steps into the bar and he knew he'd made what might be a fatal mistake by not examining the brands on the other ponies tied outside.

Gundar Jensen, Rocking H foreman, was at the bar with four hands and they were getting noisy drunk. Gundar was a top-heavy man with blond hair, a bull neck and a voice like a frog in a rain barrel.

When he got drunk he had a faint accent. He turned on Nick and said, "Ah, my wery goot friend. You like it at the Rocking H last night, yes?"

Discretion was a hundred per cent of valor. "Like it? Was I there last night?"

"All your friends with straw in their hair were there. We kill four and one more will die. Three have little holes in them." Jensen looked at him suspiciously. "We have three dead, Lees. You sure you not there?"

"Sounds like a good place not to be. Why all the shooting?"

"The foolish ones, they come in to kill the boss. Like bandits. So we shot them like bandits. Today no work. Today we bury the dead. Our dead. The farmers came and took their dead away."

"What now?" Nick asked calmly. He was beginning to relax a little. He had the definite feeling that if any of the five had recognized him as being in the group last night, he'd be dead before now. Success had given Jensen a careless and reckless swagger.

"Now? Yust to wait and the rest of the farmers get off the free range, Lees. Hey, you want job? Top-hand. Fifty and keep?"

"Not quite yet," Nick said dryly. He went down to the far end of the bar and ordered a straight shot. Millins, behind the bar, kept his eyes down. His hands shook as he poured Nick's drink.

A few minutes later, the door swung wide, creaking on its hinges, and young Johnny Forrester came into the bar. He wore a gun belt around his slim hips, pulled to the last notch.

Jensen looked at him with vague interest. Johnny Forrester wasn't quite fifteen. Johnny stared hard at Nick and then looked at the other five. He said softly, looking back at Nick, "So Sal was right! So these are your pals. So you went with us last night to trap us!"

He turned to Jensen and his voice was louder. "Where's your filthy scum boss? Where's that murderer you work for?"

"Go home, Johnny," Nick said.

Jensen had half turned and his eyes were bleak as he looked at Nick. "So you were with the farmers, eh?"

"Where's the scum you work for, Jensen?" Johnny almost screamed.

"Go home, kid," Jensen said.

"Then you'll do, Jensen. I'm drawing on you. Turn around."

Jensen turned with lumbering slowness, but his big hand was as quick as the paw of a bear snapping fish out of a stream.

Nick slapped for his own gun, shouting a warning. Johnny had yanked the gun from his holster. The shot hit him low. He groaned thinly, doubling as he fell. He writhed on the floor, still holding the big gun. Jensen slammed another shot into the boy just as he angled around, pointed blindly toward Jensen and fired. The hand nearest Jensen slumped against the bar, a puzzled look on his face. Two drops of blood gathered on the crusted black edge of the hole in his forehead.

JENSEN fired a third shot into the boy's still body. As he turned toward Lees, the gun coming up again, Nick fired, heard the loud echo of the smack of slug against flesh, saw the red blossom grow against the side of Jensen's neck. The bullet apparently clipped the spinal cord. Jensen dropped.

Nick moved to the side, away from the blue-gray drift of gunsmoke, fired twice at the wavering hand at the bar who, biting his lip with concentration, was aiming at him. The first shot, by accident, hit the weapon, screamed up into the ceiling. The second shot hit the man directly over the heart.

He fell in a sitting position, balanced grotesquely for a moment on the body of the man Johnny had shot, then went over on his face.

The other two men, suddenly sober, slowly raised their hands.

"Turn around and put your hands flat on the bar," Nick said.

They obeyed. He stepped up, yanked the weapons from the holsters, tossed them over behind the bar.

[illegible] quickly beside Johnny, [illegible]k the eyelid, stood up again. "[illegible]ad children! What next?"

One of the men at the bar said, carefully maintaining the position Nick had ordered, "There'll be a dozen men hunting you, Lees."

There was a thud of steps and tinkle of hooks on the boards of the shallow porch. Nick backed slowly to the wall where he could cover the door. The saloon door swung wide and four men came in. Nick exhaled slowly as he recognized them as Chansome, who owned the Box C eleven miles the other side of town, his foreman and two of his hands. They came in with guns drawn, spreading out inside the door. Behind them Tawser, the sheriff, entered with considerable caution.

"*Now* what do you want, Tawser?" Chansome asked disgustedly.

"Thank you, Mr. Chansome. Thank you, sir. I can handle it from here. You, Lees, put away that gun."

Nick lowered the muzzle, swung out the cylinder, picked out the three empty cases, replaced them with live rounds. Tawser held out his hand. "I'll take that. You're under arrest."

"I hardly think so," Nick said mildly.

"Damn it, Tawser," Chansome said, "find out what happened here before you arrest anybody. What happened, Lees?"

"You heard about last night?" Nick asked. Chansome nodded. "The Forrester kid came in to draw on Jensen. Jensen killed him and then swung on me. I killed Jensen in self-defence and one of his boys the same way."

The other two had turned away from the bar. Millins had come up from his prone position behind the bar. Chansome said, "Right, Millins?"

"Just like that," Millins said.

The older of the two Rocking H hands

said, "You know a little better than that, Millins."

Millins, still trembling, squared his shoulders. "I go along with you boys just so far. But this killing little kids I don't hold with."

Tawser shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. His voice was a brave bray. "I better take you in, Lees."

Chansome turned away. Tawser made three slow steps toward Nick. Nick said, "Then stay all the way out, Chansome. Don't back him." As he spoke he moved inside the gun which Tawser held so rigidly on him. He grabbed the gun wrist with his left hand, yanked hard as he drove his right fist up. Tawser went down on his face.

Chansome studied Lees almost without interest. He said, "Better ride far."

Nick ran outside, yanked the reins free, jumped into the saddle.

Three miles out, as he had slowed to a lope, he met Sal Forrester coming in on a buckboard.

"Hold up!" he called. Even as he dreaded what he had to tell her, he saw the odd look on her face at the tone he had used. Her face was almost too thin for beauty. He couldn't waste time being gentle. He said flatly, "Jensen killed Johnny fifteen minutes ago."

She shook her head dazedly, and said softly, "Too much! Too much! I can't—"

Then, with a sort of wild pride he said, "And I killed Jensen."

She sat very still, then lifted her face and looked at him. "You take pride in that? Blood and guns! Why did we come here? Why?"

He sat high in the saddle and looked in both directions on the empty road. There was time to get his few belongings, load a pack animal, hit the high trails across the hills and get away. What more could a man do?

Anger hadn't driven him to kill Jensen. It had been fear. He knew that. And suddenly, looking down at the girl's shaking shoulders he knew that if he rode on he would forever remember her sitting there, completely alone.

He swung down, tied his pony to the rear of the vehicle, climbed up and took the reins.

"We'll go get the body," he said.

"But if you killed Jensen—"

He clucked to the horse, unholstered his revolver, laid it on the seat between them. He stared ahead through the sun-glare to where the road wavered in the heat waves. After a few minutes he glanced at her. Her chin was high, her mouth firm.

He turned as he heard the horse overtaking them. Bob Furnell had his bedroll lashed behind the saddle. He walked the horse beside the buckboard and said, "Hoped to see you, Nick. It's all over, so I'm riding out."

In a flat, emotionless tone, Nick Lees told Furnell what had happened.

Bob scratched his chin, said, "Maybe I don't get it. You going back into town?" Nick nodded. He felt Bob studying him. Furnell said then, "If you can go back into town, I guess I can stay on the payroll a bit longer."

It was when they could see the weathered buildings that the heavy pounding of hoofs behind them caused Bob to say softly, "Company, Nick."

Nick reined in, turned and saw Thomas Haggar surrounded by eight riders. Haggar was in his early forties, tall, lean, pale, hard—with a cadaverous face, dark clothes. He was astride a big bay. Nick felt shock at seeing Haggar out this way. Of late the man had taken to remaining inside his ranchhouse, plotting his moves, but never taking part in them. It was over eight months since Nick had seen the man. He was disturbed by the change he saw, by the fanatic glow in the deep-set eyes.

Haggar swung his group around so that they halted in a shallow half circle.

Haggar said, "Well, Lees. I'm curious to know if you were in the little group who paid me a visit last night."

"I was there," Nick said slowly.

Obviously Haggar hadn't expected the admission. "That makes things simpler," Haggar said. "I'm joining Jensen in town and I'm swearing out a warrant against all those I suspect."

Nick said, "I'm going to town to get the body of Miss Forrester's brother. Jensen killed him."

Haggar seemed to notice Sally Forrester for the first time. He touched his hatbrim, and said, "My sympathy, Miss Forrester. Your brother shouldn't have

quarreled with Jensen. He's too tough."

"The boy was fourteen," Nick said harshly.

"Fourteen!" Haggar gasped. "I don't understand. Jensen will be called to account for this."

"I called him to account," Nick said. "I killed him."

The sun bit down into them, into the electric stillness. Haggar sat his horse, expressionless.

In the same tone Nick said, "You've got a sickness, Haggar. You've ordered killings and the burning of houses and you poisoned my spring. There's something off in your head. You've bought loyalty of a sort from that bunch of badlands scum surrounding you right now. You're winning for a little while the same way any ruthlessness will win, for a little while. Now get out of my way."

Haggar said softly, "Get down. Lees. Get away from the girl."

The horsemen moved a bit closer. Nick knew, with anger and despair in his heart, that this was the end.

Slowly he reached down for the gun he had placed on the seat. His hand touched the girl's cool hand.

Her voice was low and vibrant as she said, "Mr. Haggar, I have a gun in my hand. I never thought I could kill. But now I know that I can try. If you do not move out of the way. . . ."

Slowly she lifted the gun to where they could see it. Haggar cursed, one low word that was like a whip-lash across her face. He yanked his big bay into a rearing turn. His men followed him. He called back, "I'll see you in town, Lees."

IT WAS a deserted town they rode into. Horses dozed in the sun, tails switching at the deer flies.

The buckboard had a small, improvised cargo space, a bare six feet long, behind the seat springs. Nick pulled the horse to a stop in front of the Garnet House. Undoubtedly the bodies had been taken into the side parlor.

He called out, "I'm helping Miss Forrester get her brother's body. So hold off. I'll take her to the edge of town. And then I'll come back."

"No," she said softly.

He and Furnell made her wait. They went into the Garnet House. Millins, his face pale, pointed out the blanket-wrapped body of the boy. It was astonishingly light.

Nick climbed once more onto the seat beside Sal. He swung the vehicle around and sat stiff and taut as he drove it slowly back the way they had come.

At last they were outside town. He got down, said, "I have to go back. Bob, you ride along with Miss Forrester."

"But, I—"

"I'm paying you, Furnell!"

He untied his horse, swung up, turned back toward town.

The Garnet House had a wooden projection out over where the sidewalk would one day be. It was a good dozen feet from the ground. Above it were the windows of the hotel's second floor rooms.

He walked his horse to within decent gunshot of the first building. The town still had that dead, sleeping look.

Suddenly he bent low against the horse's neck, raked with the hooks, yelled shrilly. The horse lit out at a full, dead run. Still yelling he went down the main street, dust puffs swirling up, planning on the surprise his maneuver should create.

As he neared the Garnet House, he loosened his feet in the stirrups. He swerved his pony toward the overhang, dropped his reins, grabbed the saddle horn, got his legs up under him, half kneeling, rising to spring high. His hands caught the wooden edge and for a moment he swung, then snaked himself up. He rolled on the splintery wood, got his feet under him, plunged for the nearest window.

Glass slashed the back of his hand. He hit hard, rolled to the far wall, pulling his gun as he crouched and then stood up. Sun slanted through against the bare board floor. The room was empty, the door ajar.

He stood still, his shoulders flat against the wall, breathing heavily. A distant board creaked. He moved cautiously, sliding along the wall toward the door. A voice whispered hoarsely in the hallway outside.

He heard a window being stealthily raised. That much was clear. They would come at him from two sides. Some at the door. Maybe only one at the window, after creeping across the overhang, hug-

ging the outside wall lake a shadow.

He made his decision quickly. He took one step, kicked the door shut violently, raced to the window, grabbed the frame, swung his feet out through the space where the glass had been, dropped onto the overhang, firing, as he dropped, at the startled man halfway between the two windows.

The man grunted soddenly and fell back as the slug hit him. He tried to aim. Nick fired again. The man took three wavering steps back to the edge, then dropped from sight. Nick whirled, fired once back through the window into the room he had left, raced to the other window, the one that had been opened. Two rifle slugs smashed into the outside wall near him.

A second man was inside the room. Nick went in fast. The man slowly raised his hands. Nick recognized him as a Haggar rider.

"Turn around," Nick said, moving over away from the window. But the man had no chance. The over-eager rifleman across the street pumped one through the window. The man fell, dying in a flood of blood.

Nick kept out of line of the window, cautious of the rifle across the street. This was a separate hallway from the one outside the first room. Both hallways ran through the building, parallel to each other and at right angles to the street outside.

He tried to guess where Haggar would be. If he could get to Haggar, the whole thing might fall apart. It might. The money-loyalty Haggar had purchased should cease when the source of supply was gone.

It would be typical of Haggar to be down in the saloon seated at a table in the rear, carefully guarded, waiting for word of the death of Lees. There had been a strange friendship between the burly Jensen and the lean, dynamic Haggar.

To confirm his guess, he edged to the window, looked diagonally down to the saloon which adjoined the Garnet House. The big bay stood outside in the sun. Nick knew that so far he had gained a few minutes of grace by doing the unexpected. But he knew time was running short. He made a count. Haggar had come in with eight riders. There had been two others left in the bar. Eleven, counting Haggar. And now nine, counting Haggar. Add Tawser and it would be up to an even ten.

Once again the town seemed to be drowsing in the sun. He heard the heat-song of insects, smelled the dust that had been stirred up from the road. His hand was sweaty on the grooved walnut of the gun grip. He dried his palm on his shirt. From his position at the end of the corridor he controlled the staircase. The other room doors were shut.

Suddenly he tensed as he heard the thin scraping sound. He identified it as the scrape of cloth on wood, as someone dragging himself up over the edge of the overhang, under cover of the rifleman across the way. He was afraid of the rifle.

Looking toward the stairway, Nick saw a hat move above the floor level, move oddly back and forth and he knew that it was held up on a stick or a gun barrel. They wanted to draw fire.

He tried to guess what was in their minds. They could believe him either in the room, or in the hallway. The rifleman would not know. That would give him two windows to cover. So it was worth a chance.

Mentally he went over the move, even to how he would have to place his feet. He practiced in his mind. Slowly he counted to three. The man who had crawled up should be on his feet by now.

NICK stood with his back against the wall, the window at his left. He turned, moving fast, moving to the side, passing in front of the window, his back to the stairway. He held his gun at belly height. The man stood outside the window, a bare six feet away. Nick fired, continuing his spin to land on the other side of the window with his back against the wall once more, his gun leveled at the stairway.

The shot had spiderwebbed the window. He stood tense, disheartened by the fact that he had missed.

Then he heard the long sucking breath, heard the man outside fall full length

onto the wooden floor of the overhang. The rifle spoke again and the glass exploded in the window.

The man had taken the slug, then. Had stood as long as he could before falling. The crazy wildness of it, the crazy luck, went to Nick's head like whiskey. He laughed aloud and yelled, "Come on! Come and get it while it's hot!"

He dropped to his belly, wiggled back to the other side of the window, cautiously stood erect. Then he moved slowly down toward the stairs.

The rifle began to speak again, in measured cadence. Two slugs tore through the dry-rotted wood beside the window. Others came through the window itself. He flattened against the wall, his belly sucked in.

It was then that he heard the rolling thunder of the hoofs, the horsemen riding into town, and his heart sank because he knew that Haggar had help.

The knowledge that he was through gave him reckless courage. When the rifle spoke again, he ran for the stairs. As he neared the stairs, he sent both feet out in front of him in a long flat slide. A gun slammed, the orange muzzle blast penciling up at him from the three crouched figures on the stairs.

Even as he fell he fired once, and then there wasn't time for a second shot. His spurred boot ground down into an uplifted face and he clubbed at another with the gun before, impossibly tangled, they rolled in a grunting heap down the wooden stairs, crashing through the railing where the stairs angled, dropping heavily to the floor seven feet below just at the arched entrance of the small side parlor where, such a short time before, he and Furnell had picked up the boy's body.

A fist smashed against his temple as he tried to rise and it felled him. He slid on his shoulder, levering the gun around to fire at the man who had struck him. He saw the man go down, saw the aimed gun, felt the white-hot blow that smashed his arm to the floor, sent his own gun spinning away. And one of the two who had been in the barroom stood over him, aiming carefully.

The shot was enormously loud and Nick felt no impact of the slug, could not understand what had happened until he saw the man standing over him release the gun, a serious expression still on his face. He released the gun which bounded from the frayed rug, then followed it down, crumpling slowly.

Another of the three men who had been on the stairs was already still. The third was getting up dizzily when the second shot from somewhere behind Nick caught the man and killed him.

"Can you shoot with your left hand," Furnell asked softly.

"I told you to take the girl—"

"She sent me back here. Come on. We're going out the way back, the way I came in."

BLOOD was hot on Nick's right hand. His fingers were numb. He got the gun in his left hand and they were both backing to the rear of the lobby when shots sounded from the street in front.

"What the hell?" Bob said softly.

There were three more scattered shots and then the door between the hotel parlor and the saloon burst open and Haggar, looking back over his shoulder, came running out through the arched doorway with an easy, long-legged stride, a gun in his hand.

He sensed the men in front of him, turned and, with incredible speed, snap-fired as he launched his lean body in a long dive that took him behind the cover of a leather couch.

Furnell sighed deeply as though he were very tired. He took three jerky steps over to a chair, sat down and held the heavy palms of both hands against his stomach, the gun unheeded in his lap.

Nick, the gun in his left hand, began his slow walk toward the leather couch. He walked heavily, with no pretense at silence, saying as he walked, "I came back to town to see you, Haggar. Stand up."

He reached the couch and he was dizzy with the pain in his right wrist. He was but dimly conscious of the men who had come through the parlor into the lobby. All that mattered was the nearness of Haggar.

He rounded the end of the couch and his finger tightened on the trigger as Haggar came up slowly, rising to his full height. But Haggar's hands were high above his head.

The deep-set eyes burned and the thin lips were twisted in a smile as Haggar said, "Now you wouldn't shoot an unarmed man, Lees." His tone was wheedling.

Nick stood numbly, unable to think clearly. He knew that somehow Haggar had won, that there would be no real evidence against the man.

And as he stood there, as Haggar's even white teeth showed in a thin smile, there was another shot. Haggar's lips mushroomed in a red-purple flower and the smashed teeth flew in bits like tiny grains of rice. Haggar went back two slow steps, coughed wetly, his eyes agonized. He toppled over the back of the couch, landing grotesquely face down on the seat of the couch, slipping, an inch at a time, off onto the floor.

Nick turned like a man in a trance, saw Bob Furnell, smiling weakly, holding his gun in an unsteady hand.

Bob said, "With his bullet in my gut I guess I can shoot him even with his hands in the air."

NICK LEES sat on the bottom step of the schoolhouse porch. Sally Forrester stood behind him, her arms crossed, leaning against the door frame. Nick's bandaged hand and wrist were white against the night.

He said, "So I found out that what I said to Chansome had made a dent in him. He rode out and talked to his neighbors and they decided that they had enough of a stake in this piece of country to ride in together and put a lid on Haggar. They rode right into the middle of my fracas. Haggar's hired gunmen lost their courage right fast. Haggar ran out of the side door of the saloon through the little parlor of the hotel, right into me."

Her voice was quiet and it had a faraway sound. "How is Furnell?"

"He's tough. He's in a bad way, but he'll pull out of it. Sorry I couldn't get to Johnny's funeral. I was sitting with Bob. I rode over thinking you'd be gone by now."

"I stayed to see how it would all come out."

"They fired Tawser and put in a new man. A good one. The country'll be quiet now. Haggar just went land crazy. There won't be any more like that."

She said softly, "So many dead. So much heartbreak. Is the land worth it, Nick?"

He looked at the night-shadowed line of the hills, smelled the night-damp richness of the soil. He said, "I guess it is. I guess it always will be."

"It hasn't left me with much," she said bitterly.

Her tone made him uncomfortable. He said, "I was hoping you hadn't gone because I wanted to thank you for sending Bob back after me."

She said, "He . . . he talked to me. He said strange things. He told me that there was a time in every man's life when he had to go crazy mad to protect his own way of thinking and his own way of life. He said a half-man would ride away from trouble. I hadn't thought that way before."

"Your menfolk were man size, all the way through. They died for those three hundred twenty acres you people claimed on. In dying they helped whittle Haggar down. And they won. Seems a shame to leave now."

Her voice was like a cry of pain. "But what can I do? A woman alone."

He stood up slowly, turned to face her. With her on a step above him they were of a height. He said, "I know you have some cousins back east. Go back there, Sal, just for a little while. Just for a visit. Then think about this country, Sal. Maybe you'll came back." He paused, licked his lips, said huskily, "When you come back, you won't be alone."

He flushed in the night at the boldness of his words. He walked off, swung awkwardly up onto his horse, rode slowly out. He turned and looked back. She was still in the doorway. The lighted lamp was behind her. He decided he would send Mrs. Layden over to stay with her. As he looked back he saw her lift one arm and wave after him.

Grinning, he walked the horse along, and after a time he raised his voice in time with the hoof-clops on the dry trail, the soft song of an easy-going man.

THE END

ONCE A GUN-WOLF—

Thrilling Novel

By T. T. FLYNN

CHAPTER ONE

Bad Trouble at Oro Grande

THERE had been trouble. Bob Denton knew it when he saw the Kingsville-bound stage had turned back to Oro Grande. Denton rode back to Oro Grande on the Sun Dance road. He hit

Lead tore through his chest. The second bullet ripped his mid-section above the gun belt buckle.

The gods of the crimson gun trails decreed that Bob Denton's owlhoot past would catch him. It did, when he found he must either lose his honest way of life, or shoot to death his roughest, toughest—and most murderous—best friend. . . .

the bench to the southeast of Oro Grande, off which the Sun Dance road pitched in six easy zigs to the lower flats, and across them to the town itself.

The piñons and stunted cedars on the bench cut off his view of the country below until he reached the drop line. There, because he was in no hurry, Denton pulled up his bay and reached for tobacco. He eased in the saddle, long and flat-waisted.

His capable hands shaped the smoke while Denton looked over the lower flats to the town with its trees and orderly rows of houses. It was just another town and Denton had seen many. Yet in a few months Oro Grande had become the focus of his life, his hopes and future.

He was twisting the end of the cigarette when his eye caught the gray dust drift swirling along the Kingsville road. It drew into the open, and it was a four-horse stage outfit, rolling at full gallop—and no stage was due from the south in the middle of the morning.

Denton shook the bay into a run. That stage had headed south out of Oro Grande hours ago, and should still be traveling south. Here, Denton thought, was trouble.

He came into town by a different way than the stage. The fury of his gallop drew stares from townspeople he passed. They hadn't seen the stage returning.

Oro Grande had the usual main street of ruts, dust and comfortable width. It had plenty stores, saloons and dancehalls—especially saloons. It was a junction point and the only way out to the railroad for a great sweep of ranching and mining country north and east. A man could find better towns but this was Denton's now, for better or worse.

The stage was entering town from the south at full gallop. Denton spurred toward the adobe stage station, with its benches under the wide sun canopy over the walk.

But Tim Calhoun, the stage driver, made a locked-wheel, span-rearing stop in front of Dr. Job Reynolds' little white frame office, next to Hoffstettor's Mercantile Store, on down the street.

Tim rode the driver's seat alone. Denton closed the distance, spurring again. Men were bolting out of doorways, pounding along the walks and running across the street toward the stage.

Dust churned up as Calhoun scrambled down. Passengers were emerging and speaking excitedly to the men who ran up, Denton dropped off his horse and left it rein-tied as he made for the stage.

The story was bad. Road agents had taken the bank's money shipment and valuables the seven passengers had owned. Gray-haired Henry Jackson, who owned the stage line, had been riding the shotgun seat.

Jackson was brave—and foolish. He'd tried to get the first masked man who showed. A hidden gun had drilled him before he pulled the trigger.

Denton helped lift Jackson out of the stage. Blood was stiff on the old man's brown coat and gray shirt. It was drying in smears on his gnarled hands and lined face as they carried him into Reynolds' office.

Doc was out on a call. Denton heard men yelling they'd find the doctor.

Christiana Jackson, Henry's daughter, was there suddenly in the little building with them, men letting her slip almost at Denton's heels into Doc's back office. Her voice was clear as they put her father on the narrow oilcloth-covered table where Doc did his work with knives, needles and probes.

Christy said, "Dad! Can you hear me?"

That was all, but no answer came from the figure on the table.

DENTON took her elbow. "He'll be all right soon as Doc gets here," he said gently.

Christy had a brown-dusted, usually gay and friendly face. She had the bloom of twenty, with honest eyes under a soft sweep of tawny hair.

She came to Denton's shoulder and her laughter had often been at his shoulder of late. But in this crowded, smelly back room office grief touched her face. "He shouldn't have been riding that stage!" the girl said slowly.

A strange look was on Christy's face. Denton had been expecting that look to appear there for at least three weeks now. It was three weeks since the Meyer girl had come to sing and dance at Bull Weather's Palace.

But Denton had never expected Christy's doubt and suspicion to be linked

with the possible death of her father.

He thought Fred Breckenridge, the deputy sheriff, would be the man to put doubt in Christy's eyes. Breckenridge disliked Denton. He probably would have even if Christy had not been an unmentioned bar between them.

Breckenridge had stumbled on just enough truth to bring out all Christy's angry pride, if he chose to mention it. And he would, one day.

But now as Christy spoke, Breckenridge was outside on the plank walk, shouting orders to a gathering posse. "He shouldn't have been riding that stage!" she said again.

Denton knew what she was thinking. So did other men who heard her words. Denton himself should have been riding gun guard today. Jackson had more to do as owner than hold down the shotgun seat while relay teams whirled the stage to Kingsville, on the railroad.

"I shouldn't have taken the day off," Denton agreed mildly. "Christy, you can't help in here. It'll do you no good to stay." But he knew she would anyhow. Then: "I wish I could stay with you," Denton said.

"You can't help here," said Christy. She swallowed hard. "You can help make sure they never shoot another man!"

"I can do that," Denton agreed. He groped for her hand and pressed it and quickly left the building, not liking all this in front of curious eyes. There had been enough covert smiles about himself and Christy. Talk too, you could be sure, although not within Denton's earshot.

Fred Breckenridge was still out front, where most of the town seemed gathered. Mounted men were ranging the street, ready to ride with Breckenridge.

Oscar Deland, the bank cashier, was talking excitedly to the deputy as Denton stepped out. "Fifty-two hundred dollars in the shipment, Fred! I counted it myself. All gold twenties! It's too much to lose!"

Denton stopped beside them. "All double eagles?"

Deland nodded. He was a balding man in his middle thirties, unmarried, and something of a sport, as far as a banker could be. He liked his drink, was seen at many of the dances and was liked by most people. Oscar Deland got around.

Denton asked, "Anyone know the money was being sent out on this stage?"

"No one!"

But Denton persisted, "It hadn't been spoken of outside the bank? No one in the bank said a word to anyone?"

Oscar Deland said, "Of course not!" And a flush that could have been anger came to his face.

Breckenridge was a powerful young man. He liked hand-embossed boots, and silver about his belt and side gun and spurs and bridle. But he backed the deputy's badge well despite his touch of bull-headed vanity.

Another man than Denton might not have brought the curt remark from Breckenridge. "You trying to take charge of all this, Denton? And while we're on it, how did Henry Jackson happen to be holding down your job today?"

DENTON had known this would come from Breckenridge sooner or later. Christy Jackson had asked it with her own eyes as she stood beside her father.

"I took the day off," Denton said shortly.

"What for?"

"My business."

"Been in town all morning?"

"You stepped out of the saddle shop as I came in off the Sun Dance road," Denton reminded. "Wasting time, aren't you?"

Breckenridge flushed. "The Sun Dance road runs southeast," he said.

"And the stage was robbed south, where a man could cut over to the Sun Dance road," said Denton. "Why don't you say it, mister, instead of hinting around?"

Dr. Job Reynolds' single horse rig came whirling up. Breckenridge shouted to the mounted men in the street, "We'll start soon as Doc tells us how Jackson is!"

Deland stepped away, and after waiting a moment and seeing Breckenridge was breaking off the talk by ignoring him, Denton swung off along the walk.

He had no illusions. Breckenridge had put it into words, and the big, curly-haired deputy would hold to the idea, worry it and follow it out. He didn't like Denton.

The bleak irony of it stayed with Den-

ton as he went about his business. A man never out-ran his past. It was not what Breckenridge knew or suspected now that counted. It was what he might find out. And if the deputy worried at the matter of Bob Denton long and hard enough, he might find out more than he expected.

Denton turned into Bull Weather's Palace, as elaborate a place as you'd find in a town the size of Oro Grande. The place was deserted. Not even Weather's massive shiny-bald head was in sight. There was too much excitement down the street. But Shorty Conroy, one of the bartenders, was watching the stock and cash drawer from the doorway, where he could watch the street also.

"Ain't one thing, it's another," greeted Shorty. "How bad's Jackson hurt?"

"Bad." Denton looked along the deserted bar. "The Meyer girl around?"

"She don't work mornings."

"I know. But I didn't see her down the street. Thought she might have stopped by."

"She went riding early," Shorty said. "Seen her pass."

"Going where?"

"Hell! How do I know? I ain't nursemaid to Bull's gals."

"I want a rye," Denton said, and took his time with the drink and rolling a cigarette. Shorty could be too curious. More than ever the business ahead needed thinking out.

Behind the thinking was anger, feeding on itself and all he suspected. Those who knew Denton, Christy Jackson included, would be expecting him to ride with the posse. Or follow it.

Denton said, "I'd better get a fresh horse," and walked out of the Palace, back to the bay horse he'd left at the doctor's office.

Someone had wrapped the reins around Hoffstettor's hitch bar. The straggle end of the posse was on down the street, trotting in dust the leaders had raised.

Christy was inside. People were massed on the walk and in the street. "Heard how he is?" Denton asked.

"Word come out Doc says it'll be touch an' go," a man said.

That was as good as Denton had expected. Better even, if Doc Reynolds had sent out the truth. Denton let it stand that way as he rode to Cooly's Livery. Most of the stalls were empty. Men in the posse had hired Cooly's horses. The hostler sat on a greasy box inside the wide doorway and shook his head.

"Ain't a good one left. I saddled so many so fast I got a lame arm."

"Did one of Bull Weather's girls hire a horse this morning?" Denton asked.

"Nope."

"You sure?"

"Been here since dawn. I seen her pass though. That purty new one. She was on one of Trimble's hosses."

Ed Trimble's barn was up at the other end of the street. Denton rode first to the horse sheds behind the stage station. Henry Jackson had only the best for his stage teams and saddle stock. The place was deserted. Denton was glad of it. The horse he wanted and meant to buy from Jackson was in one of the end stalls. It was deep-chested, powerful, fast. Denton shifted saddles, found a canteen in the supply shed and filled it at the pump.

He never rode out these days without his saddle carbine and belt gun. He considered riding to Trimble's barn and asking questions about the girl. Then he decided it would be time wasted. She had started from Trimble's at the north end of town, and passed the Palace, heading south, and made the turn off Main Street, past Cooly's Livery. Which headed her out of town west, where one could ride a mile or a hundred miles and not get anywhere. And that was about as much as Denton needed to know.

HE RODE south out of town, the way the posse had gone, running the horse easily until it got its wind. Denton's anger was cold rage now.

Miles out, with the posse still out of sight ahead, Denton turned off the Kingsville road, heading west by south. He headed toward the south sweep of the Yamapai badlands, and before long the horse was lathered.

Denton had little use for a man who punished a horse. But in any lifetime there was a day when the rules were broken. This was Denton's day. If the pony suffered from this ride, it had to be.

Two hours later he was in the badlands. Rock dikes and deep gullies criss-

crossed the lonely miles. Lava too, brownish-red, writhed in frozen streams. Nothing to bring a man this way.

Equally dry and desolate, Yamapai Range thrust its fluted spires to the sky ahead. Beyond the western slopes of those low mountains were the Salt Horse Flats, where the sun shimmered and blazed on miles of salt and alkali beds.

Breckenridge's posse had gone the other way, east of the Kingsville road. Denton wasn't too sure he wasn't making a fool of himself. But he had reasons for this ride and had to run them out.

The girl must have sighted him from some higher vantage point. She rode out suddenly from the cover of a lava dike which ended just ahead.

Denton's carbine was out of the scabbard, cocked, at the first sign of another rider. Then he saw who it was, and slowed to a trot, then a walk. The woman rode like a man, in saddle pants and jacket, with rifle and canteen, cream sombrero and gauntlet gloves of soft leather. Denton knew those hands. They had a tender touch.

She was a lush and lovely girl. Her face had the slightest olive tint and her eyes were soft and wise. Long lashes, ripe mouth, in her middle twenties, she was slender and always graceful. She was Rita Meyers, and Denton had known her before he came to this country.

He had been dismayed to see her arrive in Oro Grande three weeks ago. He had guessed she meant trouble. Rita had a leather-cased spyglass thonged to her saddle-horn. She lifted it and called, "I saw your dust, Bob. Then I saw you in the glass. I was surprised."

"Who's with you, Rita?"

"No one."

Denton scanned the terrain. Lava blocks big enough to hide a horse and man had tumbled off the main lava flow. Rita watched him in amusement.

"What brings you so far from town, Rita?"

"Riding." She shrugged. "For fun."

"Rough country to ride in for fun."

"I ride where I like, Bob." The woman's smile showed perfect teeth. "Were you following me?" And then Rita laughed at him. "You could have found me any night in town."

"Stop that!" said Denton impatiently. He reined over beside her. With a quick reach he caught out her saddle gun. The action turned her face white with anger. "Bob, what are you doing?"

Rita had come out without a side gun. Denton was mindful of the derringer she had always carried somewhere out of sight in the old days. He considered searching for the small gun, then decided to risk ignoring it.

"Let's ride, Rita."

"Where?"

"What difference?" Denton countered. "You're riding for fun."

RITA'S dark eyes were narrower and her voice came sharper. "You're out here for trouble."

"No trouble with you, Rita. Who else?"

"Stop it!" said Rita angrily. "You must have found out Dick Wilson and his friends are around. You wouldnt be out this way if you didn't know."

"So!" Denton said. He'd been right then. "Did you know the Oro Grande stage was going to be held up today?"

Rita's wide-eyed astonishment was instant. Fear shadowed her look. A quick tightness was in her reply. "I haven't heard anything about it."

"I didn't ride gun guard today," Denton said evenly. "Henry Jackson took my place. He was shot. Probably going to die." Denton's voice was harsh. "Would have been me if Id made the trip!"

"Wilson had nothing to do with it," the woman said.

Denton stared at her silently.

Rita swallowed. "Dick was your best friend," she reminded him. The strain was greater in her voice.

"And you're still Dick's girl!" Denton snapped. "You drifted into Oro Grande and tried to tell me different when we talked. Ride with me." Denton squinted at the sun. Heat waves shimmered over the badlands. Noon was two hours past. The full strike of the afternoon heat was about them.

For a long moment Rita's calculation held her stiff in the saddle. Then silently she rode with him.

"There's one good water hole out this way," Denton observed. "Bear Butte Pool. The stage passengers said four men

were in the hold-up bunch. They headed east, like they meant to swing down through Squaw Creek Flats and take the old rustler way to the border. Any sensible gunnies who'd lifted six thousand off the stage and passengers would take it on the run that way."

"If you say so," Rita agreed. "I don't know this country very well." She was friendly again. Too friendly. Denton knew her. "So what's the use of riding on like this and talking about Dick and a stage hold-up?" she protested.

"I was one of the old bunch," Denton reminded. "That's the way they liked to lay out a job. Every sign pointing to where they'd head if they had any sense. They'd start that way, split up and cover tracks, and make a long roundy, and come right back, through the back door, you might say. They'd bury the money and lay low for a time, smooth as sheep-killing dogs."

Denton said it matter-of-factly, with an undertone of harshness. That had been part of his past. Rita knew it. She was watching him, thinking hard, fast. Rita was more clever than she looked, more dangerous than a stranger would guess.

"All that was four years ago," Rita reminded.

CHAPTER TWO

The Parson's Stolen Fortune

"WILSON is fast with his guns and slow on new ideas," Denton said. "If a thing works, he keeps trying it. Also, he's not ready to leave these parts."

"How do you know?"

Denton's thin smile was frosty. "You're still around. Dick won't be far away. When you showed up in Oro Grande I began expecting Dick. Didn't pay much atttention to your story of breaking off with him. You wouldn't have made the ride out this way today if you knew Dick's bunch was working," he decided. "Has he been afraid to show up in town and see you?" Denton let her ride in silence. They were bearing southwest now, toward Bear Butte. The butte wasn't impressive, rising as it did from a lower trough of the landscape, with the greater mass of the mountains on beyond. Only the small seep spring at the always shadowy and cool north side gave reason for travelers to approach the place.

Denton didn't head directly for the butte, badly as his horse needed water. He turned south, keeping to the lower washes. A man could ride all day this way through the badlands and not be seen.

"Where's their camp?" he asked Rita suddenly.

She shook her head.

Denton said, "Whatever you're thinking, honey, don't try it? We both know Wilson. Try to warn him and you'll start him shooting. Dick and I were friends. Had the same bedroll many a cold night. I don't want to kill him before we talk."

Rita's lip curled. "Dick's hard to kill."

"Every wolf has his bullet," Denton said. "Risk it if you want to."

The woman bit her lower lip gently but said nothing.

He kept her riding a little ahead. She could shoot too well with a derringer. They worked south of Bear Butte, still bearing to the east of it. Denton finally pulled up in a notch which cut through the higher ledges siding the trough running north and south, from which the butte's sides soared. He had been calculating time all the hours of his ride.

"If Dick makes a roundy this way from the hold-up, he won't get here much before dark," Denton said slowly. "He'll come in from the south. If he's expecting trouble, he'll be looking for it at the butte water. We'll wait for him here. You be comfortable—might be a damn long wait."

Rita was white again with anger. "I don't know why I'm letting you give orders like this!" she snapped.

Denton grinned. "You aren't sure where Dick is. I won't let you look for him. What else is there to do?"

An angle in the notch's south wall gave some shade. Advancing, one could see out over the rough lower ground, north to Bear Butte and south two miles, where the head of the trough pinched in.

Denton took Rita's glass studied the butte and the trough. Each was barren. The dry horses were on his mind. But the butte water was where Dick Wilson's bunch would have a look-out. There was where most riders would stop first.

Denton could be a patient man, but

sometimes things get real tough. Patience was needed now. The brassy sun crawled down toward the Yamapai spires. His water was almost gone.

Rita was smoking cigarettes constantly. Buzzards soared lazily.

Rita said suddenly, "You're a fool!"

Denton looked at her for a moment. Then: "If I'm right, Dick's bunch will slip in from the south for water. Probably one at a time."

ANOTHER girl might have tried to get away. Rita knew Denton. Knew the bloody, dangerous business around which all this revolved. She was used to taking orders from a man who meant them—Wilson.

Rita was part of the bunch. She worked in towns, picking up any information Wilson might use, while the gang hid out. It was dirty business for a girl. It had started almost a year before Denton left that way of life. He hadn't thought too much about it then. She was Dick's girl.

She could have been Bob Denton's girl. In those days he'd suspected for a time Rita had never forgiven him for not wanting her. But all that had been almost forgotten until Rita appeared in Oro Grande. Now it was part of his life again, and dangerous.

He was rolling a cigarette before using the glass again when movement in the south caught his eye. He dropped the cigarette and adjusted the spyglass. A moment later he was looking closely at Wilson himself.

"What is it?" Rita asked sharply.

He turned his head. "It's Dick's life. Take a chance if you want to."

"Are you going to shoot him?"

"Want to talk to him."

Denton hunkered behind a large boulder. He laid the carbine on the ground and rolled another cigarette. The rage which had stayed down deep began to feed again on the memory of Henry Jackson and the grief on Christy Jackson's face. And yet Dick Wilson had been a close friend. . . .

Wilson pulled up, leisurely built a smoke and scrutinized the ledge rim and on toward Bear Butte. Then he came on toward the notch itself. He meant to come through the notch and use the cover of the higher ledges to get abreast of Bear Butte, unseen, using the same way Denton had come.

Denton came to one knee behind the sheltering boulder and pulled the Colt gun and checked it.

He motioned Rita to keep back in the notch out of sight, and watched her from the corner of his eye. A rough natural trail angled down from the notch. Dick put his horse steadily to the climb. Denton waited until he heard the hard-breathing horse top the trail, a few yards beyond the boulder. Then he came up suddenly, gun cocked. "Climb down, Dick! Easy!"

THE startled horse swerved. Dick swore and a quick grin of relief hit him. "You near jumped me into a gun play, Bob. Howdy, boy!"

"Been too bad if you'd tried it," Denton said briefly. "Step down, Dick. On this side of your horse."

Wilson's mouth got ugly looking. "What's the idea, Bob? This a joke?"

The past was with them, strong with memories. These men had bunked together, drank together, ridden, fought, yarned around far campfires.

But the rage Denton had brought across the Yamapai badlands had not abated. "Same kind of joke you and your men played on the stage," Denton said. "Same kind of fun Henry Jackson had when he was shot off the stage seat. Get down, Dick. Keep your back to me while you unbuckle that gun belt and step away from it."

Dick said, "Hell, you ain't the law! Nobody hurt you! Put up that gun, Bob. We got a lot of talk to catch up with. I been meaning to get in touch with you since Rita said you were in these parts."

"That's all I wanted to know," Denton said. "She told you. And you went ahead, even when you knew I'd settled peacefully in Oro Grande and was working for Jackson's stage line. Get down, Dick, damn you!"

Rita moved forward into view.

Suspicion darkened Dick's gaunt face. "So you hooked up with Bob? You double-crossing—"

"You fool! Keep quiet!" Rita blazed. "I told you Bob's calf-eyed over Jackson's daughter. I was riding out here to talk to you when Bob came along. He

made me ride along here with him."

Rita's sarcasm thinned her voice. "Bob's all worked up because you shot her dad! No telling what he'll do! Let him have his way!"

Wilson stepped slowly off the sorrel. Silently, his back to Denton, he unbuckled the gun belt with an angry yank and dropped it.

"Why'd you move in on this range?" Denton demanded.

"Didn't know you were here," Wilson said. He stepped away from the gun belt and wheeled carefully, palms open and away from his thighs. "I didn't know where you'd faded to." A sour grin touched his face. "Things got warm up north. We drifted down this way where we weren't known."

Dick pursed his lips. "Hell, Bob, if you're working for wages, you ain't doing so well. Look! Whitey's still with me. Got a couple more men just as good. Big Tex went to San Antone to see a girl. He ain't staying long. Throw in with us again. Easy pickin's. We'll be fat as feeder steers without half-tryin'."

"Had all that out once before," said Denton. "We were younger then; hot-headed—with not too much sense. Made our first play for easy money without thinking too much about it. Dick, it never was easy. It got harder. We were shaping into a bunch of hardcases when I added the tally and quit. Remember?"

Dick's smile had little meaning. It could have been friendly or just short of a sneer. Dick's voice was the same way.

"Bob, when you pulled out, Lefty Dane offered to bet the boys his share of the next haul you'd gone faint-hearted."

"I read in a Denver paper Lefty was killed by a sheriff's posse out of Cheyenne," Denton said without emotion. "What happened to Sam Foote and Cal Whitehead?"

"Sam pulled a gun on the wrong man over in Utah. Cal got careless in Arizona and didn't make it away from a stage job he was trying alone. One of the passengers was a deputy who didn't have any more sense than to start shootin'."

"Lefty and Cal weren't faint-hearted," Denton said. "They were plain damn fools to keep on at it."

"I'm still at it," Dick reminded, grinning. "An' I'm here, Bob. Not much of a damn fool. Listen, the ones I travel with now use their heads."

THE past was close about them. Too close. For they were older now, and the smiling youth Dick Wilson had been was gone somewhere in the quick passing years.

Denton made one more try to reach back to the past. "Dick, you used to talk of your own brand and a piece of land with good water. And settling down when you had a stake. Remember that night at Indian Spring when you got to talking about how Rita wanted a home and kids? And deserved them?"

Dick spat his disgust. "Talkin' through my hat. Can you see Rita nursing brats an' washing dirty dishes? She's a loud-music girl. She wants crowds and plenty men thinkin' she's the prettiest sight that's stood in front of them for a long time."

"One time I could see her as the prettiest girl who ever bossed her own kitchen," Denton said slowly. "It was a good sight. Better than tramping the dance halls, doing your dirty work for you, Dick."

Rita flared, "Don't worry about what I do! Dick and I get along all right!"

"It's your business," Denton agreed. "The stage hold-up is my business. Dick, those saddle bags look heavy. Get 'em on the ground beside your gun."

Dick grunted with effort as he heaved the heavy leather bags down. They landed hard. One reason, Denton guessed, why the sorrel horse was so jaded. It had carried a heavy burden far and fast.

Dick looked past his horse into the south. Looking for more of the bunch. They'd be coming.

"You and Rita," Denton said, "walk on down the trail and wait for the others. I'll drift your horses a couple of miles. You can get them by dark."

"You ain't taking me in?" Dick asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Call it old times. All I want is to see the last of you, Dick. Move on with your bunch."

"Wouldn't be planning to make a haul of that bank money yourself, Bob?"

"I don't work that way now, Dick. How much is there?"

"All of it." Wilson grinned. "Bob, you don't dare take me in. Won't help to shoot me. Rita would still be around to talk. The town wouldn't like it, would they, to hear what you used to be? Or get the idea you been working with us all along. Rita could tell 'em; they'd believe her."

"Kind of thought that would get in your mind," said Denton. "That's why I'm not taking you in. You're in the clear on this hold-up as long as you keep quiet and move on. Start talking, and no matter what happens to me, the sheriff will be after you. Won't be worth it, Dick. Now get going, you and your woman."

Rita began to laugh. It had a hysterical pitch. "He's got you, Dick! Neither one of us can make a move. Let's go before Bob decides to shoot me too. He's on a trigger edge about that girl and her father."

Wilson's profanity was loud as he swung to the trail and kept going without looking back.

"Is it worth it, Bob?" Rita asked, and she followed her man.

Denton didn't bother to look in the saddle bags. He heaved them on his horse and led the other two horses back through the notch, and turned them loose a good two miles away. He rode openly now back to the seep spring at Bear Butte, watered his pony, drank deeply himself, filled the canteen, and headed back toward Oro Grande.

TWILIGHT came down as he covered the long miles home. Denton rode glumly conscious he'd done the wrong thing. Wilson was a hardcase now, killer and outlaw by choice. He'd never change.

Christy Jackson wouldn't understand this day's business. Nor would anyone else. Denton faced it squarely. He was a prisoner of his own past, and what he'd hoped to build for the future.

Lights glinted along Main Street and in a few houses. Denton rode into town quietly from the north, not using the stage road. He cut through a rutted alleyway and stopped behind the plank shed where the Reverend Amos Clegg kept his buggy horse.

The Clegg house was dark. Denton heaved the heavy saddle bags over the whitewashed back fence, and retraced his way out of town, hoping he hadn't been seen.

He rode a wide swing around town and came in from the south on the Kingsville road, openly, leisurely, and rode to the stage stables with no more than a brief greeting to several men along Main Street.

He had hoped the stage station would still be deserted. But old Shack Mason, night hostler and watchman, came out the back door with a lighted lantern when Denton had almost finished rubbing his horse down with a grain sack, after watering and feeding liberally.

Old Shack had been dozing in the station. He was still yawning. "Fred Breckenridge bring the rest of the boys in?" Shack asked.

"Didn't catch up with his party."

"Some of the boys come in couple hours ago," Shack said. "The trail split an' they lost the tracks they were follerin'."

Denton stepped out of the open-front shed and paused to roll a smoke. Shack's dim lantern light fell on a white smear along Denton's pants leg.

In the dark Denton hadn't noticed how hard he'd brushed Amos Clegg's whitewashed fence when he'd heaved the saddle bags over. He turned so that the leg was away from the light.

"How's Jackson?"

"Holdin' his own, which ain't much," Shack said. "Folks are riled. There's talk of a rope party if Breckenridge brings back ary prisoners."

"I'll go by Jackson's house," Denton said.

He stopped first at his hotel room, washed quickly and hauled on clean clothes. Brushing with his palm had failed to remove all trace of whitewash. And old Shack was shrewd. He noticed things. Tonight the white smear had meant nothing. Not worth a comment. Tomorrow Shack might recall it. He was a talkative man. He was also fiercely loyal to Jackson and Christy.

Lamps were still burning in Jackson's clapboarded cottage. Several men were talking on the front steps, women were in rocking chairs on the porch. Christy would have help tonight.

They told him Christy was in the kitchen. Denton stepped to the back door and Christy let him in.

His brief, "No luck," disposed of the long day's ride, and he asked, "What can I do tonight?"

Shadows had gathered under Christy's eyes. But the first shock had passed. She was calm. "I have all the help here I need, Bob. But I won't be able to leave the house much. Dr. Job doesn't know himself what will happen." Christy hesitated. "If you could see that the stages run—take charge of everything else for us. . . ."

"Don't worry about that, Christy." Denton was silent a moment, looking down at her. "I'd give my right arm if I hadn't taken today off."

"You couldn't suspect there'd be trouble, Bob."

Denton took that thought back with him to his hotel room. But his last thoughts as he dropped off to sleep were ominous. This wasn't the end of trouble; this was the beginning.

IN THE morning he felt no better about it. But there was work to do. Stages had to run. Jackson's business went on. Fred Breckenridge and the rest of his posse returned toward noon, hungry, tired, empty-handed.

Breckenridge had taken his posse ahead on a fast night ride, hoping to come up with the outlaws somewhere around McClosky's Well. It had been a bad guess. They'd found nothing at the well. Their horses had been in bad shape. By morning it had been too late to follow any trail toward the border.

Late in the afternoon Denton was at Henry Jackson's scarred old desk in the back room of the stage station. In the next hour or so stages were due in from the north, from Sun Dance and from Kingsville, on the railroad.

Denton was thinking about his first meeting with Christy. He'd been heading toward Oro Grande for the first time, cutting through the mountains to the east. His horse had floundered on a bad spot in the trail. Saddle cinch had broken. Denton had brought up fifty feet down the steep boulder-choked slope below the trail, his ankle broken. The horse had bolted on down the trail, stranding him.

A man could have stayed there a long time before any other rider came along the little-used trail. Hours later Denton had crawled and hopped three miles down toward the lower country.

Christy had found him there. She had been riding out in the foothills, had sighted Denton's bridled, saddleless horse and guessed something was wrong. She had caught his horse and back-trailed the animal.

Denton had ended up in Christy's house in Oro Grande, given hospitality and care by the kind-hearted Jacksons. When he could walk he had gone to work for Jackson, and he had known how he wanted the future to shape.

Now here he was at Jackson's desk, bossing Jackson's affairs. . . . Voices suddenly lifted in excitement in the front room of the station, and out front where more people were gathering to meet the stages.

Denton swung out of the desk chair. Old Shack Mason came in from the waiting room and closed the connecting door again. Shack was excited too.

"Preacher Clegg jes' found all the stuff that was took off the stage!" Shack exclaimed. "Found it in saddlebags left in his back yard!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Law Looks for Man Sign

DENTON hoped he looked startled and surprised. "The hell! That doesn't make sense! Left in the open right here in town!" Old Shack was a wispy-built, stooped-shouldered old-timer. He had been a wild horse hunter and tophand in his better days, until age and stiff joints made him useless for most work. But Shack's mind was still sharp enough.

"It's one to figger out," Shack said. He shifted his chewing tobacco to the other cheek. Bloodshot old eyes were guileless as they looked at Denton.

"Bound to have happened last night," Shack said. "Some feller dropped them saddlebags over the whitewashed fence at the back o' Clegg's lot, an' then eased off."

Denton sat on the desk edge, frowning

over the facts. "Not much sense to that, Shack. Why hold up the stage, then bring the money back here to town and leave it in the open?"

"Can't figger it a joke," said Shack. "Tryin' to kill a man like Henry ain't a joke. It'll make sense when the truth comes out. Some gent here in town shore knows who shot Henry."

Shack stepped over and spat in the sand box beside the desk. He was not looking at Denton. "Some feller in town here looked them killers right in the eye yest'day an' don't aim to admit it."

"The posse scattered out, Shack. Half of them got back after dark."

Shack nodded. "There's gonna be the durndest watchin' of one another you ever seen. Everybody wonderin' if the other feller done it, an' why."

"Fred Breckenridge will find out what happened," said Denton, and wondered if he were speaking more truth than he meant to.

"He'll try," Shack agreed grimly. "An' the whole town'll be helpin' him." Shack's glance rested ever so briefly on Denton as Shack turned back to the door. "I'm goin' down the street an' watch Breckenridge bust a gut tryin' figger it out."

Denton drew a slow breath when he was alone again. Shack hadn't mentioned the smear on Denton's leg. It was possible he hadn't noticed. But it was Breckenridge's business now.

Stages came and went. At supper, in Chow Loon's Fan Tan Cafe, there was more interest at counter and tables in the finding of the saddlebags than in the food.

Denton sat near the middle of the counter and listened, saying little. He was there when Breckenridge stalked in, showing the strain of his long ride, lack of sleep, and rising temper. Questions were fired at the big deputy.

Breckenridge answered the men nearest him loudly enough to be heard by all. "Don't know any more than the rest of you! But I damn well mean to find out!"

Breckenridge hadn't come in to eat. He was checking on who was in the place. Thumb hooked in cartridge belt, he let his half-scowl rove around the room.

"Got my ideas!" he announced. "Take a little time to prove them. Meanwhile, some man in town is guilty as hell! Keep looking for him! He'll break in time."

Breckenridge swung on his heel and walked out. He hadn't singled Denton out by so much as a look. But Denton was thoughtful as he paid for his meal and walked to Jackson's house.

NOTHING much had changed there. Christy looked more tired. "At least father isn't worse," she said. "It gives some hope."

They were out back where Christy had flowers growing and two shade trees spread leafy masses above. "What do you make of this queer business of the money being returned?" Christy inquired.

Denton wanted to say, "I brought it back." And tell her why. And that, he guessed, would finish everything. He was glad of the first night shadows as he took his time about answering. A man could keep just so much off his face and out of his voice.

"Different ideas about it, Christy. But I'd hold to one thing. Whoever dropped that money over Clegg's fence can't be the one who shot your father."

"Why not?"

"That man was trying to right a wrong. The man who fired at Henry wouldn't try to right any wrong. That shot was cold-blooded."

Christy agreed doubtfully, "Someone else in the gang must have had a change of heart." Her emotion came hotly. "I can't forgive any of it! They are all guilty as far as I'm concerned!"

Denton had that on his mind a little later when he entered Bull Weather's Palace. The place was noisy as usual in the evenings. There was some dancing. Rita Meyers was at a table with an expansive drummer who had come in on the Kingsville stage.

Denton drank a whiskey, then another while they danced once. The drummer joined a man at the bar. Denton went to Rita. "Sit down," he said.

"Don't give me orders now," Rita said coldly. But she sat at an empty table. Prettier than ever, Denton thought, as he sat across from her.

"Leaving town?" he asked.

Rita said deliberately, "No."

"Dick pulling out?"

"Ask Dick." Rita put elbows on the

table and bent fingers under her chin. "You fool, Bob. The others won't like losing that money. Dick might not shoot you; I don't know. The others—" Rita shook her head— "You don't know who they are but they'll know you."

He left the Palace with the answers he wanted. Dick and his bunch weren't pulling out. They counted on Denton keeping quiet because he had to. They'd have him out of the way with a bullet at the first chance. That was the way they worked.

Meanwhile Henry Jackson's business went on. . . .

The town was watching itself, wondering who had dropped the saddlebags over Clegg's fence. Any man was apt to find other men regarding him speculatively. There was open joshing of one another. But back of it all loomed a gallows.

Denton had his share of it. He agreed good-naturedly he might be the man. Next time he'd keep the money and buy a stage line of his own.

He was managing Jackson's business; it was common knowledge Christy liked him as well as she did any man. Perhaps better. How could he have had a hand in shooting her father?

All that could change quickly. Wilson's bunch, Denton finally decided, was his danger. Dick had always been restless, impatient, eager to get on with the business at hand.

Walt Seymour, the sheriff, had come in on the Kingsville stage, stayed overnight, and returned to his Kingsville courthouse. A veteran lawman. Seymour had a reputation for taking an outlaw trail and hanging to it. The law must believe at least one man of the hold-up bunch was in Oro Grande. It seemed to be turning into a cat-and-mouse wait.

Something had to happen.

It did.

DENTON ate breakfast as usual at the Fan Tan Cafe. The usual morning crowd filled counter and tables with the usual hum of talk and mild clatter of service and eating and men entering and leaving. Denton sat at the front end of the counter. He was putting down the cup of hot black coffee when he glanced out the door and saw a rider with a lead horse slowly entering town from the south.

Not an unusual sight in Oro Grande; strangers were constantly passing through. But that short-bearded profile, burly chest, broad shoulders, feet turned out in the stirrups and lounging, insolent ease in the saddle—that was Big Tex Mallory, back from his girl in San Antone.

Big Tex, of the booming laugh, wide-set, hard-smiling eyes, club-like fists which could brawl or shoot with equal facility.

Denton had barely started eating. If he left the food and stepped outside now, men eating near him would quickly wonder why.

Denton finished breakfast while his foreboding grew. There was no sign of Big Tex or his two horses when Denton walked to the stage station.

Rita was there on one of the benches, in a dark, severely tailored traveling suit, black gloves and small modest hat. A leather bag rested by her feet. In the severe clothes, Rita could have been one of the most respectable of the younger married women. She was alone in the room, save for old Shack Mason, behind the counter, until Tom Colter, the clerk, came to work. Any other early passengers were probably out behind the station watching the early stages being readied.

Rita nodded and Denton said, "Leaving town?"

He saw Mason's morose stare on them, not missing anything. Shack's interest might be the reason Rita acted like a stranger.

"I'm taking the Kingsville stage," Rita said briefly.

Big Tex was on Denton's mind; Shack Mason or not, he had to speak with Rita. "We can sit in my office until the stage is ready," he said, and he saw Shack's mouth open as if to protest, and then close silently.

Rita shrugged, left the leather bag there and walked in the back room when Denton held the door open. She stopped as Denton followed her in and closed the door.

Denton stopped too. Christy Jackson was standing by the desk chair, where she had been sitting, waiting. Shack had been about to warn of this and hadn't, and it was not good.

CHRISTY'S manner left no doubt she knew Rita was one of the Palace girls. Rita turned a glance on Denton, obviously not liking it either.

"Christy, I didn't know you were in here. How's your father this morning?" That was all Denton could think of to say. He was struck by Christy's pallor, then aware of Christy's sudden flush as she looked at them.

"Father's a little better," Christy said.

Rita might have had a trace of mockery, of satisfaction in her remark. "I'll wait in the other room, Bob."

"Stay here," Christy said, and now Denton knew it was bad.

Bull Weather's girls weren't introduced to girls like Christy; but this was Christy's choosing.

"Miss Jackson—Rita Meyers, who's been working at the Palace," Denton said, and felt like he was perspiring.

"I know," Christy said. Her flush was deepening. Rita was looking her over coolly and Christy didn't like it.

The back door was open to the sun-baked yard where the Kingsville stage was being readied. They heard Tim Calhoun's loud demand that his matched spans be better curried before they went into the oiled brass-studded harness. Half an hour later the Sun Dance stage would leave, then the north-bound stage. Yard and station would be busy until all that was out of the way.

"I came to ask you a question, Bob," Christy said. "Where did you ride the other day when you missed Fred's posse?"

That was the moment Denton laid the future aside, as he had guessed for days he would have to. "I didn't try to find the posse, Christy. For reasons of my own, I rode over into the badlands."

"Alone?"

"I met Miss Meyers out there and rode with her part of the afternoon."

Christy said huskily, "That's what a woman friend suggested last night. You asked about her here in town and followed her and spent the rest of the day with her."

"He could have done worse," Rita said. "Bob, you left a trail and the gossips sniffed it out. Serves you right."

Christy's voice showed a growing strain. "So it *is* true?" she snapped. "Don't misunderstand me, either of you! I don't care who Bob Denton rides out with. I don't care what girls he knows! But my father took over Bob's job that day, and may yet die from what happened!" Christy was close to stammering. "Any decent man would have tried to hunt the outlaws who shot father! Bob pretended he was, and rode off to spend the afternoon—*that afternoon*—with a dancehall girl!"

Denton broke in harshly, "Stop it, Christy! There's—"

Christy's rushing words cut him off. "I'm stopping everything, Bob! A man who would do that isn't one I want at father's desk, trusted with his affairs! Pay yourself what money is due you! I'll take charge now!"

Denton said, "All right, if that's what you want."

"Why, you fool, Bob!" Rita said in a choked voice. "After all the preaching you did to me, you're walking out like this in the end!"

Rita stepped to Christy. "Bob wouldn't wipe his feet on me," she said. "He knows I've loved another man for years. He used to be that man's friend. What do you know about men, or trust, or what you want? Work the dancehalls like I have because your man wants you to! Lie in bed at night and think about the home you'll never have because he doesn't want it! You won't worry then about what the gossips come talking! Why didn't you ask Bob what he was doing out in the badlands the other day? He didn't have to make that ride to see *me!* I've been at the Palace every day!"

"Never mind," Denton said, and he doubted that either girl heard him.

That was the moment Fred Breckenridge came in from the waiting room, old Shack Mason at his heels. Somehow Denton wasn't surprised. This all went together.

"Did you have Breckenridge waiting?" Denton asked Christy, and hard bitter lines at his mouth went in deeply as Breckenridge pulled his gun.

"Shack will take your gun, Denton! Hold easy!"

CHRISTY protested, "Fred, what are you doing?" She moved to come between them.

Shack Mason had jerked Denton's gun from its holster and stepped aside. "Kept my mouth shet tight, 'long as I figgered he was a Jackson man!" Shack said. "I heerd through the door when you fired him, Mis' Christy, an' I stepped out fer the law. Denton's the one dumped them saddlebags over Clegg's fence!"

"Shack! Are you sure?"

"Dern sure, ma'am! I been watchin' him to see what he'd try next. But didn't aim to talk, 'long as he was runnin' things fer you."

"So that's why?" Christy said to Rita, and Rita nodded.

Breckenridge's satisfaction showed dourly on his solid face. It roughened his voice. "Like I thought, Denton! You're one of them! Knew what the stage was carryin' and missed the trip on purpose. Lost your nerve after Henry was shot. Or maybe you got another idea quick; you'd bring the money back and hope folks would forget it, while you got your hands on a lot more if Henry died. Like that, wasn't it? Had your eye on Christy?"

Thinly, off the rage building again in him, Denton said, "Put up the gun and step outside and say it!"

Breckenridge sneered, "Had your chance to tell the law what you knew, Denton, and you didn't. We're stepping out back to the Kingsville stage, before the town gets together for a hanging. Not that I hate a hanging, mister. But Walt Seymour ordered it handled that way."

Denton bit out, "Don't you go to Kingsville! Got reasons not to! Stay in town today! Trouble's coming! Probably the bank!"

He saw Rita's startled look. Christy had a strange, intent expression.

Breckenridge snapped, "It won't work, Denton! We're takin' the stage!"

"We're not running the Kingsville stage today." Christy said slowly.

The deputy snapped, "Calhoun's out there getting ready to leave!"

"Tim hasn't heard either," Christy said. "I'll tell him."

"It will run; you're trying to interfere with the law, Christy!" Breckenridge exploded. "I won't have that! Not even from you! I'm the law, Christy!"

"*I'm* the stage line," Christy said.

"Then I'll take him handcuffed on the bed of a buckboard!" Breckenridge said thickly. "Christy, you've been blind ever since you hauled this stranger home! Why, a day after this Meyer girl came to the Palace, Denton had his head close to hers in a booth!"

Breckenridge had handcuffs ready; his gun muzzle had stayed steady on Denton's middle. He was sweating with anger as he ordered, "Damn you, Denton, turn around! We're going to Kingsville!"

"Watch him, Fred; he's dangerous," Christy said sharply.

"*All right!*" Christy said, and Denton's gun barrel, in old Shack Mason's hand, buffaloed the deputy behind the ear.

Even Bob Denton hadn't noticed how old Shack had sidled casually into position. Some look must have passed between Shack and Christy; some order to the old man whose loyalty to the Jackson's was know to everyone.

Denton's jump caught the deputy as he sagged down. Denton wanted gun and handcuffs. Breckenridge was out cold. While he let the heavy figure down and snapped handcuffs on one wrist, Denton heard Rita speak to Christy.

"Well, no stage today," Rita commented. "I'll go back to my room." She was leaving when Denton clamped compelling fingers on her wrist.

"Stay with us, Rita. What's Wilson planning today?"

Rita tried to break away. "I don't know!"

"Rita, it can't be," Denton said. "You can't warn Dick."

Rita gasped, "I've got to if he's hitting trouble!"

"Not this time," Denton said. "It's Dick's choosing. I warned him." Denton dragged up the deputy's handcuffed wrist and snapped the other steel loop around Rita's wrist. "Sit down beside him, Rita!"

He caught her other hand as it dipped quickly inside her tailored jacket. "Not the derringer either," said Denton, and grabbed the weapon.

Old Shack had closed and bolted the back door. He shuffled over and slid the bolt on the door into the waiting room.

"We've clumb out on a limb an' cut it through," Shack said. "Now where we gonna light?"

Denton asked again, "Rita, you don't know what's planned?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not sure either," Denton said. "Big Tex is in town with a spare horse." He had his gun back from Shack, and he stripped off the deputy's gun belt and held it and Breckenridge's gun while he looked at Shack. "Can you hold Breckenridge quiet?"

"Fer a little—but this is the stage station," Shack reminded. "Whyn't you get some help, mister?"

"Stir the town up and maybe nothing happens," said Denton. "Be all to do over some other time. I may be locked up by then. You too, and Christy. Breckenridge won't feel kindly after this."

His carbine was leaning in the corner. He caught it up and let himself out the back door. He heard Shack bar the door behind him. Tim Calhoun, shaved, brushed and elegant as usual, was watching the harnessing of his stage spans.

Denton walked to him. "No stage to Kingsville this morning, Tim."

"No stage?" Tim repeated. "Why the hell not?"

"Orders," Denton said, "and none of your damn business, you loud-mouthed Irishman." Denton lowered his voice; hostlers were near. "If you had a gun on your hip and were standing around on Main Street with your mouth shut, you might get a shot at one of the men who put that lead in Henry Jackson."

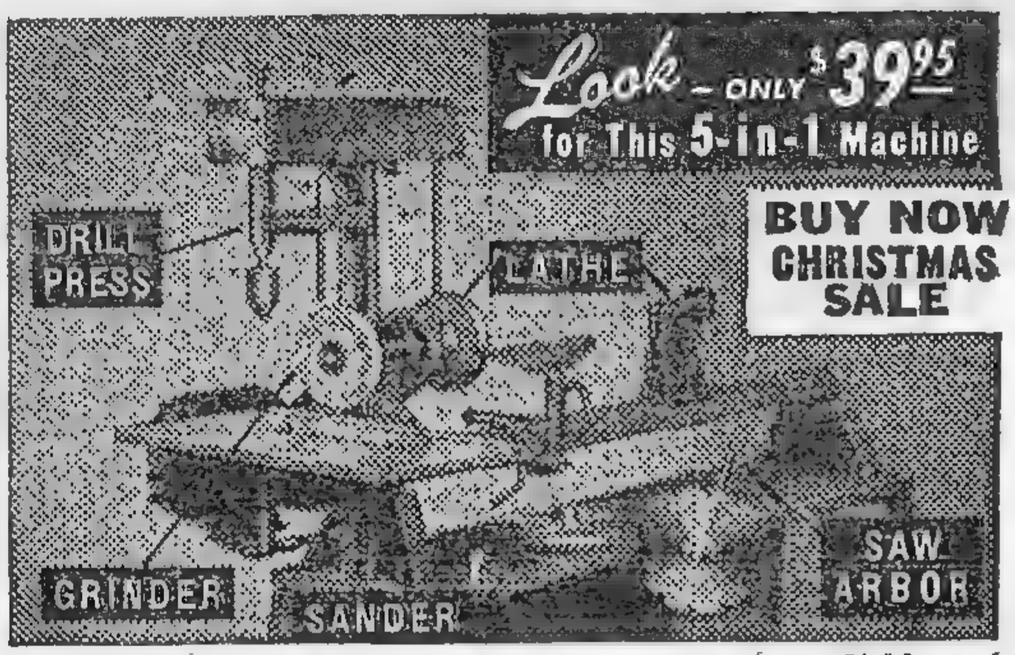
"You don't say?" said Calhoun. "Well, I got the shuttest mouth and the standingest feet this side of Kingsville for a chance like that. Where do I stand?"

"Anywhere. Watch any stranger with a lead horse. There's one in town. Might be more by now. Might not all have an extra horse. If you hear trouble, you'll know what it is."

CHAPTER FOUR

Undercover Man

DENTON skirted the stage station, nodded to men already on the benches under the walk canopy; he crossed the dusty street and turned right on the plank walk, sixgun unobtrusively under his coat and the carbine carelessly held by the barrel.



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He looked across at the bank on the street corner. The windowshades were still pulled down; he looked at his watch. . . . Nine minutes before Oscar Deland would run up the green shades and unlock the front door.

At the end of Main Street Denton turned around and started back. He was tighter inside as his gamble ran thinner. He could have been wrong. He wondered what was happening in the stage station office. Wondered if Breckenridge had managed a shout for help. That would be the end. Breckenridge was the law; the town would back him.

Stumpy Giddings, a gnome of a man with pointed chin, red-veined pointed nose and a hand-whittled wooden leg, probably the most liked of the town idlers, came stumping along the walk planks.

"What's wrong with the Kingsville stage? It ain't runnin' today." Stumpy demanded, blinking.

"Little change in the schedule," Denton said. Then, to stop more questions: "Seen a bearded stranger with a lead horse?"

"Sure," assented Stump. "He was gittin' a loose shoe on his lead hoss fixed at Stovell's shop. Said he was ridin' to Sun Dance today. Come from Kingsville. I asked. Sure had two fine hosses."

"He might trade for that lead horse if the dicker was right," Denton speculated, and passed Stumpy the price of two drinks.

Denton crossed the street. Stumpy would string the drinks out for the next hour, not interested in anything else. The blacksmith shop! Should have thought of it! On the side street, a hitch lot on the far side littered with old wagon gear, a stranger at Stovell's would be well out of sight of anyone looking for him.

Big Tex was not at Stovell's. The smith was working his big leather forge bellows in the smoky open-front shed. He had a wagon tie rod in the heat.

"Said he was heading on to Sun Dance," Joe Stovell said. "Had me look at the shoes on both his horses. Said he hated to lose a shoe when he was traveling. Know him?"

"Wanted to look at his lead horse," Denton said.

"A man with horses like that ain't like-

ly to trade when he's travelin'," Stovell said.

"Every man's got a price," Denton judged, turning back to Main Street. It looked like the gamble was lost.

And yet, Sun Dance. What was at Sun Dance to draw that bunch? Nothing that Denton knew of. And Big Tex had had all shoes of his two horses checked.

It meant nothing to Stovell. To Denton it suggested Big Tex was carefully making ready for a hard fast ride. A harder ride, and faster, then he would ever make on a trip to Sun Dance. It didn't sound right; not when you knew Wilson's habits.

Denton crossed Main Street again and passed Hoffstettor's store. Henry Murchison, who owned the hotel, came across the street.

"I was just asking Tim Calhoun why he's not taking the stage out to Kingsville," Henry said. "Had two at my hotel meant to take it. Tim said he was waiting for orders."

"That's right, Henry," Denton said, and left Henry standing there thinking it over.

Denton had the feeling his time was running out. Calhoun had been loitering across the street, and now was moving on that opposite walk as Denton moved back toward the stage station. Their glances met. Tim shook his head. Denton shrugged, and then he reached the bank corner. The green fly-specked window shades had been run up, the door was open and several customers already inside. Denton leaned the carbine against the corner of the bank and rolled a cigarette, unwilling to move on to the stage station, where irritated passengers waited, and Christy and Shack Mason held all the worst of the gamble now.

Standing there, the anger began to eat at Denton again. His cold rage built against Dick Wilson, who had brought all this to Oro Grande. It was then Denton looked up the side street and saw a rider coming toward Main Street with a lead horse. He looked along Main Street beyond the stage station and saw another rider with a lead horse.

He dropped the cigarette and looked across the street where Tim Calhoun had

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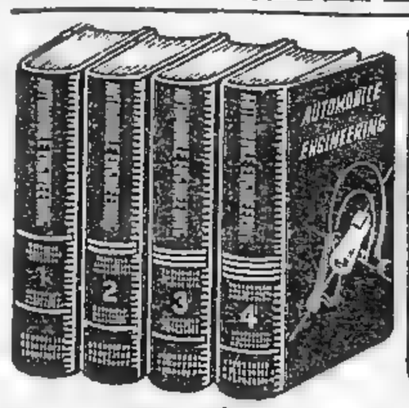

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stopped on that corner. He caught Tim's eye and nodded and reached for the carbine and walked into the bank.

This was the pattern Wilson had often talked out. Everything timed to the minute. In town from different directions. Get the money and get out before the town knew what was happening.

OSCAR DELAND, the cashier, was alone behind one of the two wickets in the iron grillwork. Hornsby, the bookkeeper, was either late to work or had stepped out. Miss Finch, the milliner and dressmaker to the best town ladies, and the best dancehall girls too, if truth were admitted, was talking through the wicket. Cal Anderson, the saddle shop man, waited with some impatience behind her. Dr. Job Reynolds and a rancher were making out deposit slips or checks at the wall desks.

Denton went to Miss Finch's elbow and spoke evenly through the grillwork. "Deland, your bank will be held up in about two minutes. Lock your safe and run before they have guns on you."

Miss Finch gasped. Cal Anderson stood as if uncertain he'd heard right. Oscar Deland's balding head ducked a little.

"You going to hold up the bank, Denton?" Deland asked loudly.

"Same men who shot Henry Jackson," Denton warned. "Lock up!"

Miss Finch squeaked; she was beyond screaming as she snatched up her open bank book and fled.

Cal Anderson blurted, "Damn it, Deland, I got all my savings in this bank! Don't take a chance!"

"Now, now!" Oscar Deland soothed.

The front door slammed shut. Miss Finch's cry choked off into a strangled gasp. And the sound was inside the closed door, still in the bank.

Denton wheeled around. Miss Finch was fainting as the gunman who had shut the door barred her way with a drawn gun. Denton had never seen the stocky, sandy-mustached fellow before. But Dick Wilson was running with new men now.

Miss Finch and her elaborate hat seemed to sink slowly down out of the way. Actually Miss Finch crumpled fast. But Denton was moving faster.

His hand slapped fast, fast to the hickory handle of his belt gun. No need to think, to plan. He saw what was at the door and knew what had to be done.

Miss Finch and her hat were still going down. The stranger had already pulled his gun. He'd heard Denton's name and knew what to do. He dodged a step over to the right, crouching a little as he saw Denton facing him.

The saddle shop man and Doc Reynolds were out of it. Denton had forgotten they existed. His target was there at the door. But he heard the saddle shop owner cry, *"Watch Deland!"*

Denton lunged to the right also, ducking. He heard the roaring report of Deland's revolver behind him. The smash of Deland's bullet in his left shoulder drove him on down to a knee.

Deland had tried cold-blooded murder from behind. It made many things clear. Denton felt no pain. But he'd never known the great wild searing anger which caught at him now. The fury steadied him on one knee. It held him on the target there beside the front door. Deland's second bullet would smash his back. Denton left his back an open target while he drove shots at the man who had stopped Miss Finch. Two shots—one long crash of sound, so fast did the hammer fall.

The fellow must have thought Deland had settled it; he had hesitated. Lead tore his chest, the second bullet ripped his midsection above the gun belt buckle. It drove him reeling against the door frame, a dying man, a dead man.

Deland must have thought the shoulder hit was enough. Perhaps Denton's speed in dealing death had shocked the cashier into slowness. Denton was coming around on the knee before Deland fired again. The shot missed and smashed one of the front windows into a cascade of clattering glass.

THROUGH the muzzle vapor of the shot, Denton saw why Deland had missed. Cal Anderson had hurled his bank book and soiled canvas sack of deposit money squarely into the wicket as Deland had fired.

Oscar Deland's face, still livid behind the grillwork, took on awful knowledge as

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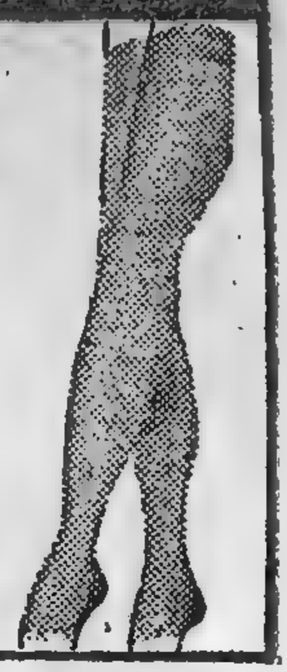

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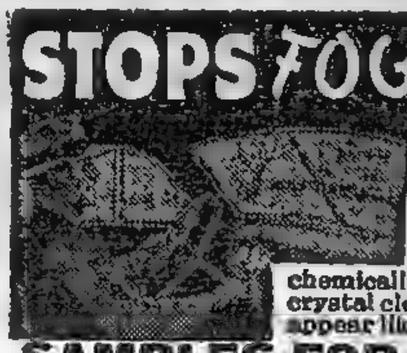

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he missed and looked squarely into Denton's face and gun.

His record now was clear. He must have known Rita well at the Palace, and told her when the bank was shipping money. And when the money was stolen and returned, Deland had worked with Dick Wilson's bunch to clean the bank out this time. When Denton had stepped up with his warning, Deland had made his gamble to help the bunch and leave town with them.

He would have broken the bank, the town, the men and women who had trusted him. He was only a cheap sport, greedy for easy money. He'd made his try at a man's back; now he was through.

Oscar Deland must have known it in that instant when his nerve broke and he ducked down behind the counter out of sight. Denton drove the big .45 slugs through the thin dry wood. One bullet reached the safe front and howled up into the white plaster overhead.

It was only then Denton noticed his left hand had dropped the carbine. Cal Anderson had snatched it up. Levering a shell into place, Anderson kicked open the gate at the end of the counter. His finger on the carbine trigger, Anderson looked and relaxed. He stepped in fast, bent over, and came out with Oscar Deland's revolver.

"Right in the face!" Anderson said loudly.

Denton's left arm was numb and dripping blood as he made the fingers grip his big revolver while he flipped empty shells out and thumbed in more.

"More coming!" Denton warned.

He faced the door and saw Dr. Job Reynolds stooping for the big Colt gun which had landed on the floor beside Miss Finch's hat. The black-coated, pink-cheeked little doctor seemed in no hurry. He saved lives in that same calm way; he'd take life now as methodically.

But the rush of horses and dust to the front of the bank was not methodical. It materialized outside the broken window in a flurry of savage action, horses yanked up, men launching from saddles. One man was Big Tex, gun in each hand as he lunged across the walk to the bank door.

There was a back door to the bank.

Denton had forgotten that back door. He heard gunfire out front. Saw one of the bunch go down at the edge of the walk. Saw Big Tex shooting through the door glass at Doc Reynolds. Saw Anderson sighting the carbine at the front door.

But Dick Wilson wasn't in sight out front. Denton's rage was centered on Dick, who had had his warning. Calhoun was in action out on the street. Anderson was triggering the carbine. Reynolds was staggering away from Miss Finch as Denton jumped for the gate leading behind the grillwork.

He knew as a man knows destiny that he'd meet Dick there by the big safe with its door left open invitingly.

Denton had his instant of regret that he'd probably never again see Christy. It had been a great warm, hopeful experience, knowing her and planning. The ride Denton had made toward Sun Dance, the day the stage had been held up, had been to see about a small brand and a piece of land he'd heard was for sale.

DELAND was sprawled in front of the safe—and Dick Wilson was coming through the room at the back.

Dick came in a snake-like dart, a gun in each hand blasting lead across the front of the safe before Dick's body fully showed. Any man standing there would have been cut down. Deland would have, and that would have suited Dick too. Dick could see beyond the grillwork as he jumped to the front of the safe. His storm of lead was for any man standing where Denton stood.

One thing Dick couldn't see. The big safe door was open and Denton had stepped behind it. Dick stopped shooting. Denton stepped out fast.

Dick hadn't expected it. His wide mouth was slightly parted in the gaunt dark-tanned face. His gun hammers were down. The base of his high-bridged nose flared out and Dick's wide mouth went ugly.

Neither spoke a word. They knew. Dick's thumbs violently hooked the gun hammers back. But Denton's gun was already cocked.

Dick died standing, heart shattered as he bent back, back, his guns slanting up and discharging high in Dick's last move

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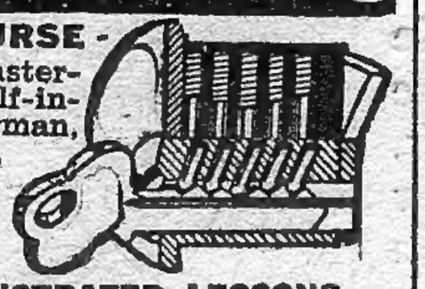

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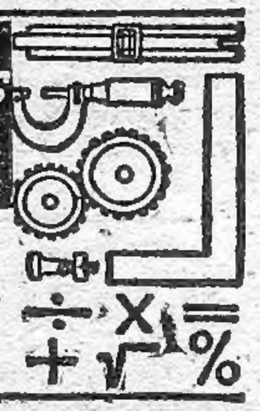

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on earth. There was a man behind Dick, who saw Dick falling back past the corner of the safe. That one had enough right there and bolted back out the rear of the bank.

Denton let him go. The great rage was fading. He saw, without much interest now, that Big Tex never had gotten inside the bank. The street was in an uproar, shots pounding out there. Tim Calhoun's gun had roused the town; Oro Grande would take care of the rest of it. Denton dropped his bloody left arm on the counter, above Oscar Deland's money drawer, and leaned wearily there, looking down at Dick. In the old days Dick would have stayed with him; he stayed with Dick now for a little, until Doc Reynolds ordered him to his office.

Reynolds had been creased hard in the side and was loudly profane that a little blood and a cracked rib was all in the day's work. But if Denton didn't get to the doc's office and get the bleeding stopped, no telling what. Denton went.

Christy, with Rita Meyers at her side, found him in the doctor's smelly office, shirt off, while Doc worked on the shoulder.

Rita said, "I knew it would happen; I've known for a long time it was going to happen. You convinced me, Bob. I was walking out on Dick today, for good."

"I wondered," Denton said.

"But you don't ever walk out on it, do you?" Rita said in a leaden voice. "You walk away and it walks with you." Rita bit her lip hard. "Good luck, Bob."

"Why, yes," Denton said. Rita was walking out. Christy stayed. Denton looked up at her, and gritted his teeth against Doc's probing; then Denton smiled. "You never did ask me what I was doing the day I took off and the stage was held up," he reminded.

Christy said, "I'm never going to, Bob. That's your business."

"Our business," Denton said. "You see, I wanted to settle here for good . . ." Denton paused, thinking about it, and when he looked up he saw that Christy knew and had probably guessed the rest. He grinned and reached for Christy's hand.

THE END

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